

THE BEST GAMES **EVER!** ISSUE

PC GAMER

WARHAMMER 40K
DAWN OF
WAR II

EXCLUSIVE REVIEW

Riddick 2
Jumpgate Evolution
Tom Clancy's HAWX
Yep, we've played them all!

DRAGON
AGE:
ORIGINS

FIRST HANDS-ON
WITH BOWARE'S
NEXT GREAT EPIC!

COVER TITLES
ARE CLICKABLE!

GAMES OF
THE YEAR

9

WINNERS
YOU MUST
PLAY NOW

REVEALED!
RED ALERT 3:
UPRISING

MARCH 2009 • NO. 185



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CLICKING A TITLE TAKES YOU DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.



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PC GAMER

GAMES

**OF THE
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ON THE DISC
Dragon Age: Origins E3 trailer, Peggles Nights trial, Strong Bad Episode 5 demo, the full PC Gamer February 2009 issue, and much more!

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LOGITECH G9X
LASER MOUSE
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OH, REALLY?

Picture this: Four editors and one intern sequestered in a room. Logan's got his goggles on—he means business. Dan is leaning back in his chair with arms crossed—he's giving no ground. Evan is tossing out off-the-wall ideas with reckless abandon. Josh is leaning forward with pen poised over paper, ready to jot down every grandiose notion, but also eager to jump in when it comes to his beloved MMOs. And here I am, in the middle of it all, the new guy, fresh from an extended stint in console-land, returning to the fine world of PC gaming, trying to corral the crew and maintain some semblance of order while offering up my own exquisite insight into what I believe are the very best games of 2008.

Indeed, it's a moment that we editors approach with an equal mixture of dread and delight. Once a year, we lock ourselves in a conference room with nothing more than a blank whiteboard, a colorful collection of erasable markers, a jug of cheap vodka, and a few pounds of salty snacks, and we don't leave until we come to a consensus on which games are the bestest of the best. This isn't a joke, people. We're *PC Gamer*, and we take this seriously, dammit!

Now picture this: Nine hours later, we *finally* emerge—sweaty, overtired, hungry, grumpy...yet oddly elated. Because we've just put our stamp of approval on nine games that we've absolutely adored in 2008. By my rough estimate, that comes out to 561,683 minutes of pure gaming bliss, so despite the heated arguments that roiled the staff, we can all feel just peachy about the state of PC gaming. And it's that very sense of joy that has informed our Games of the Year feature. Instead of boring you with standard writeups that you'd find in *other* magazines and websites, we wanted to *show* you why each game we awarded is so great. Flip ahead to p.42 for a look-see at what I'm talking about, and when you're done reading our

brilliant feature, be sure to scribble out your angry screeds describing in great detail precisely what kinds of idiots we are for leaving off *your* personal favorite. (Or better yet, just send us an email at letters@pcgamer.com.)

But we're not just looking backward here at PCG Central. We're also looking ahead to an incredible 2009. Evan scored a killer scoop with *Dragon Age: Origins*. Dan nabbed several stellar exclusives, including the most comprehensive story on the *Red Alert 3* expansion and a first review of *Dawn of War II*. Meanwhile, Logan continues to amaze me with his remarkable ability to make hardware fun, and Josh got in touch with his feminine side (turn to p.14 for more on that). And since I'm busy name-dropping (what better way to butter up the staff?), I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Fitz's eye-popping design work (get a load of that cover!) along with Deb's indubitable ability to keep things moving at the exact right pace.

All of which brings me to what might be the most controversial statement of the issue. Right there, at the very tippy-top of our cover, you might've noticed a bit of a bold statement. Really? The best games ever? What about 1998? What about 2004? Certainly there were better games in those years...

Perhaps. But it's all a matter of perspective. The way I see it, when you've got such an unbeatable breadth of quality gaming on offer, all in one issue, why not celebrate that fact by calling it out on the cover? I'm overjoyed about the overload of games that I've yet to play. I'm ecstatic about the games I'm soon to sample. And for those reasons, yes, indeed, this *is* the best games ever issue.

Well, until next issue, when we're sure to see some even *greater* games!

GARY

/// GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF ///

▶ THE PLAYLIST 0309

■ GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF



W-W-W-A-A-W-S-S-D-D. Having spent far too long holding a baby bottle with training wheels attached (aka the PS3 DualShock controller), I was quickly put on a strict regimen of remedial mouse-and-keyboard exercises by the PCG crew. Back to it, boss! W-W-W-D-D-S-D-A-W-W-click-click-click...

■ LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR



I've been looking forward to playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* for a long time now, and after launching it via Steam, well, I'm still looking forward to playing it. Until the "playable" patch comes out, there's still *World of Goo*, *Sam and Max* episodes to catch up with, and a final stand to make in *Far Cry 2*.

■ DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR



I was expecting the rush to calm down by now, but there are still too many games and too little time. The *Sins of a Solar Empire: Entrenchment* beta is out, so I've been busy fortifying my planets with starbases and mines, I still haven't finished *GTAIV* or started *Mirror's Edge*, and *Dawn of War II* is still calling to me.

■ EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Shelving *Mass Effect* for a few months has let it ferment—Jack Wall's techno sci-fi soundtrack keeps me immersed. You can bet I'll be beating down BioWare's door to bring you the first look at *ME2* (which we expect will be) later this year. Puzzle-wise, I've been preferring *Zuma's* colored orbs more than *Peggle's*.

■ DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER



Play games? More like learning how to play nice. Now that I've got a new boss to break in, I'll have to temper my sneers and jeers for at least an issue or two. Which means that my mighty rage will now be directed at the hapless drivers who happen to be in the way during my daily commute. Outta my way!!



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LETTERS

LETTERS: ORIGINS

Their dark secrets are revealed by reading the return address on the envelope! E-mail us at letters@pcgamer.com or write to us at PC Gamer Letters, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080.



/// Have RPGs gotten better or worse over the eight years since *Baldur's Gate II* was released? ///

WHEN MEN WERE MEN AND RPGS WERE RPGS

I was playing *WoW* today when for some reason my group started talking about older RPGs. I mentioned how my favorite RPG of all time, nay, my favorite *game* of all time, was *Baldur's Gate II*. And that got me thinking: What happened to the epic, party-based RPG? *BG* and its kind were amazing games. I have played through it three times and played it without completing it a couple more. Those kinds of games had so much more to offer than the "RPGs" we so often seen now. They had amazing levels of options, tons of replayability, massive worlds to

explore, interesting characters to meet (and often kill), memorable stories, etc. And they were HUGE! I was under the impression they sold decently well, so why don't we have games like this anymore?

I have great hopes for *Dragon Age: Origins*, but beyond that, I just don't see many games that promise the same experiences as *BG* and company. Is there something I am missing or has the age of the real RPG passed us by?

GRANT GEHR

Passed us by? Why, between Mass Effect, NeverWinter Nights 2:

Storm of Zehir, The Witcher: Enhanced Edition, and Fallout 3 (though the last two aren't party-based), we have to say that 2008 was an outstanding year for huge, replayable RPGs with interesting characters and stories on the PC. And with Dragon Age: Origins looming large in early 2009 (see our exclusive hands-on feature on page 30) as the first part of a proposed series of games, RPGs are arguably as good as they've ever been.

Of course, it's the nostalgia Favorite of the ing

hard to compete with associated with your Game Ever, and because relatively high cost of creat-modern game content

(it's much easier to make a low-resolution 2D world than a high-def 3D one) some of the worlds might seem small by comparison, but BioWare, Bethesda, Obsidian, and CD Projekt are all doing outstanding work in the RPG genre.

PLEASE SIR, MAY I HAVE SOME MORE?

Yes, *Left 4 Dead* is a great game, and quite possibly the best zombie game there is, but I could never play this game for "years" without the addition of a few more campaigns (for free, please—I already paid \$49.99). I cannot understand why games must be so short, and yes I realize there are numerous difficulty settings, but come on, four is extremely stingy. NICK MENESES

If Valve's track record is any indication, you have nothing to worry about. Look at Team Fortress 2: Within a year of release, Valve has tripled the number of maps available, added two new game modes, and released major updates to the Pyro, Medic, and Heavy classes—and every bit of it is automatically downloaded for free when you log into Steam. If that's not good enough for you, when asked if there are plans to release additional content for Left 4 Dead at some unspecified point in the future, Valve's Doug Lombardi responded, "Yes." So there you have it.

/// It's only a matter of time until Valve upgrades the Witch's granny undies to a sexy thong. ///



CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

I usually agree with your reviews, but with all due respect, I think you screwed up on your review of *Call of Duty: World at War*. This was my favorite game in the series so far. (Yes, I like it better than *CoD 4: Modern Warfare*. The gaming community can brand me with the mark of shame for heresy now.) I feel that your review of the game was unfair and hypercritical. My theory? The reviewer was focusing primarily on the faults of the game, and was almost cruel with the 73 percent rating. He did not talk enough about the positive aspects. Of course, it's nothing groundbreaking, but it doesn't have to be revolutionary to be a good game. As Norman Chan wrote about *Call of Duty 4*, "Is the rails-based action fun? Most definitely. Revolutionary? Hardly." SEAN KRACHT

We thought World at War was a good game, but in our judgment it simply wasn't as well-designed as its predecessor, and we don't think that most people will enjoy it quite as much as you did. It's important to note that, according to our reviewing scale, a 73 percent score is reserved for "pretty good games that we'd recommend to fans of a genre" (which is you, from the sound of things), so it's hardly a form of cruel and unusual punishment.

IT IS A DARK TIME FOR THE REBEL ALLIANCE

I was just reading about *Star Wars: The Old Republic* in your Holiday 2008 issue, and it stirred up thoughts that I've been having about this game since it was announced. I'm actually pretty disappointed about it. Right off the bat, I'd like to say I'm a longtime *Knights of the Old Republic* and BioWare fan, so that's not my problem. The issue I have is that I would have preferred they make a true single-player installment to *KOTOR* rather than an MMO. I mean,



/// We've only scratched the surface of *The Old Republic*. ///

there are just certain story elements and styles that are present in a single-player game that aren't translatable into an MMO. I know that BioWare has said story will be more important in this game than any other online game out there, but still it won't be the same. So I have a two-part question to you: One, am I the only one who is disappointed that BioWare is making an MMO and not *KOTOR3*, or do some of you at *PC Gamer* feel the same way? And two, do you believe there is any chance that a true third installment to *KOTOR* could still be released? JORDAN OETTING

There's no disputing that an MMO is an inherently different experience from a single-player RPG—your actions can only have so much effect on a world (or galaxy) inhabited by thousands of other heroes, and you will likely never have the opportunity to declare yourself the emperor

of the galaxy at the climactic ending, because there will never be an end. But on the other hand, there is so much more to explore—BioWare has promised that TOR will ship with several times as much quest content as both of the previous KOTOR games combined, and that you'll be able to play through the vast majority of it as a single-player game if you'd rather fly solo. It's still very early, though, so we're going to wait and see more of what they're offering before we decide if we wish they were working on something different. You never know—they could surprise you!

We'd say that it is conceivable that BioWare could go back and make another single-player KOTOR someday (in fact, TOR takes place hundreds of years after KOTOR 2 specifically to prevent storylines from interfering with each other), but if it does, it will be a long time from now. BioWare is just one studio, and Dragon Age and (probably) the next Mass Effect game won't make themselves. ☒



/// Nobody does *Call of Duty* like Infinity Ward, but *World at War* was still pretty good. ///

WIN A COPY OF WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR II

Read the review on page 62, then E-mail Contests@pcgamer.com with "Ham-



mer time!" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends March 20, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

EYEWITNESS

THE BIG SWITCH

WORLD OF WARCRAFT INTRODUCES A TRANTASTIC NEW TWIST ON CHARACTER CUSTOMIZATION **BY JOSH AUGUSTINE**



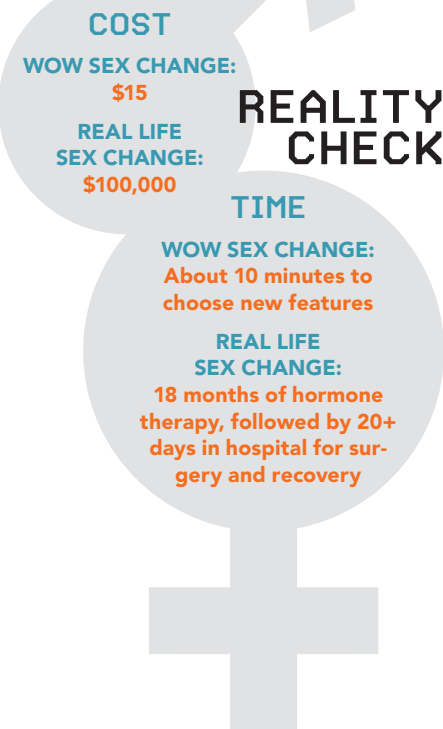
Sabretorius isn't pleased with his body. He thinks he's too fat, and that makes him feel clumsy and oafish. No matter how much he worked on it—running miles across Grizzly Hills, slaying countless orcs for exercise—he couldn't do a darn thing about his colossal chassis. "You're just

big-boned," his friends would offer in a feeble attempt to comfort him. "That's just the way it is for a Draenei."

Then one day help arrived from an

unexpected place: Blizzard itself stepped in to finally free Sabretorius—and scores of gamers just like him—from the fetters of his physique.

Blizzard's coming to the rescue with *WoW*'s new character re-customization tool, which allows you to alter any aspect of your character's body—including your sex. Whether you're looking for a simple spray-on tan or a full-scale gender reassignment, Blizzard is happy to help...for a small fee of course. Every 30 days you can pay \$15 for an opportunity to return to the character creation screen where you choose your



gender, skin color, face, hair color and style, and other aesthetic options depending on your race (which you cannot change).

NOT ALL DRAENEI ARE created equal—a painful fact that we were reminded of when Sabretorius changed his gender from male to female in order to feel more comfy with his appearance. And he's not the only one doing it. *PC Gamer* chatted with dozens of *WoW* players who leapt at the chance to alter their characters. While the cost is thankfully very different from its real life equivalent, the reasons for changing their bodies are very similar. Sarienina, a female Blood Elf we spoke with, told us that she thinks the price is "ridiculous, but my fiancé convinced me to [get the upgrades] on his dime. I wouldn't have paid for them."

But a quick tummy-tuck or boob job to thrill the fiancé isn't enough for some *WoW* ladies. One newly minted male priest told us that she would've happily paid *any* price for the modification. For years, male characters had been constantly "flirting with me and didn't respect my opinion," she sniffed. The priest was one of the very first in line for the sex change and even convinced many of her female friends to join her.

WITH MORE THAN 11 million people playing *WoW*, you can bet there are just as many reasons for wanting to change a

THE RICH GET RICHER

The re-customization tool isn't just a superficial change for some. The greediest villains of *WoW* are happy to add yet another tool to their thieving arsenal. We tracked down the notorious "Tdowns," a devious looter who's been robbing guild banks and players for years, with a massive hoard of ill-gotten loot to prove it. In the past he's resorted to new hairstyles and armor, bribes, and blocking his victims' messages in order to cover his trail. While refusing to say if he's changed names or transferred servers in the past, he did admit to pretending to be a girl in real life to sucker unwitting guys into giving him sympathy loot or paying his repair bills. He cackles in delight at all the potential new tricks up his sleeve thanks to the new re-customization tool, and he can't wait to try them out on his next victim. Guilds of Azeroth, beware! Scoundrels like Tdowns have a much greater ability to disguise themselves within your ranks now.



character's appearance. Not everyone has a remarkable tale or dramatic reason for the big switch—for example, the now-male Gnome Mortalitus, who simply shrugged: "I just got bored with it." We also encountered a Night Elf named Asari who paid full price just to change his face because he "didn't really care to change anything else. I like my character for the most part." Meanwhile, the slimmer female version of Sabretorius told us that (s)he wished (s)he could have changed her race too.

Perhaps the best news for anyone seeking "a whole new you" under their robes: acceptance for digital gender bending is relatively high. Fully two-thirds of the

players we spoke with felt comfortable telling their friends about their character's sex change, and only 20 percent had been teased because of their new gender.

Outsiders may wonder why someone would lay down 15 bucks just to change their character's gender and appearance, but many longtime players have desperately wanted this option for years. While the majority of players thought \$15 was a bit pricey, one guy told us he would've gladly paid over \$40 dollars just for this option. After all, when you're staring at the same character for hours every day, it's easy to understand wanting your persona to look *just* right. ☺



RELEASE METER 0309

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

Onward we march through the gauntlet of games set before us, braving hardware upgrades, console ports, and adjusted release dates in our quest to achieve gaming nirvana. Armed with our weapons of choice—mouse and keyboard—and the trusty guides at *PC Gamer*, we scout ahead for the best games approaching our position. Military titles are on the frontlines with *Battlefield Heroes*, *Empire: Total War*, and *Tom Clancy's HAWX* leading the charge in Q1. *Ghostbusters*, *Dragon Age*, and *Riddick 2* continue the shock-and-awe tactic in Q2. Brace yourselves, the great games keep coming!

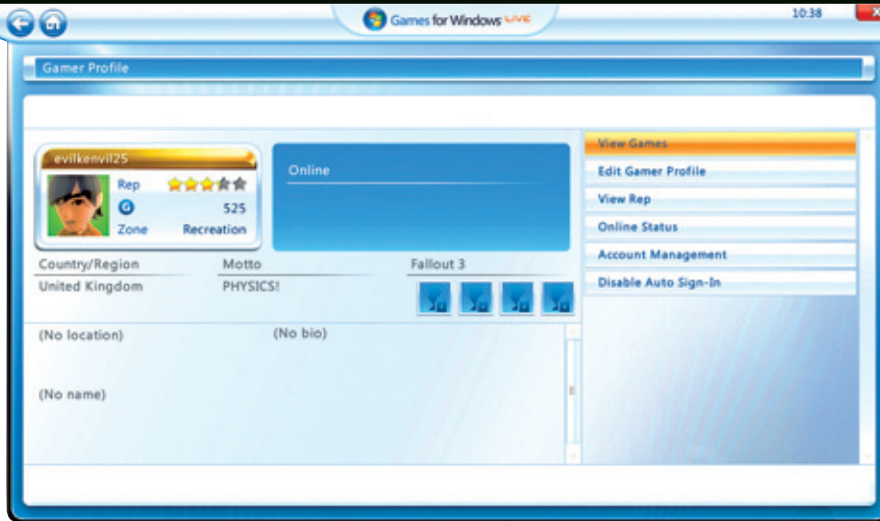
—Josh the Intern

Q1 2009

Bionic Commando	Capcom
Street Fighter IV	Capcom
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Burnout Paradise	EA
The Godfather II	EA
The Sims 3	EA
Battlestations: Pacific	Eidos
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Dungeon Hero	Gamecock
Pro Evolution Soccer 2009	Konami
Empire: Total War	Sega
Demigod	Stardock
Anno 1404	Ubisoft
Tom Clancy's Endwar	Ubisoft
Tom Clancy's HAWX	Ubisoft
F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin	Warner Bros. Interactive
Puzzle Quest: Galactrix	D3
Wanted	Warner Bros. Interactive
Battleforge	EA
Borderlands	2K Games

Q2 2009

Champions Online	2K Games
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Activision
The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena	Atari
Ghostbusters: The Video Game	Atari
Dark Void	Capcom
FUEL	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Spore: Space Expansion Pack	EA
Divinity 2	Ego Draconis
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak Interactive
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	THQ
Avatar	Ubisoft
Prototype	Sierra



/// Out with the old, in with the blue. ///

GAMES FOR WINDOWS LIVE 2.0

MICROSOFT REBOOTS ITS PLAN TO RULE ONLINE GAMING, BUT IS IT ENOUGH?

With roughly the same amount of fanfare associated with events such as going to the post office or getting an oil change, Microsoft has quietly relaunched its Games for Windows Live service. The online gaming application, used to connect players in multiplayer games, suffered from a lack of

games and support ever since it was launched as a paid-for service in 2007. But in the brave new world of Games for Windows Live, both *Fallout 3* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* use the service for updates and multiplayer.

COMPARED TO THE LACKLUSTER

launch games *Halo 2* and *Shadowrun*, these A-list titles are a clear statement that Microsoft hasn't surrendered the field to Steam and Xfire just yet. Microsoft has also dropped the fee for the service, and even provided refunds for gamers who paid to use Live exclusively for the PC and not with Xbox Live.

Microsoft also intends to create a PC-specific marketplace offering demos, videos, and expansions for the eager gamer to throw money at. In fact, GFWL will be the only place Vault dwellers will be able to



/// GFWL bags *GTA:IV*. Not bad for starters. ///

buy the upcoming *Fallout 3* downloadable content.

Overall, the new GFWL interface feels more spritely and comprehensive: There's a profile tab, a friends list, chat tab, a message center, and a list of people that you've played with recently. However, GFWL can still only be accessed in-game, so in order to see the interface you need to first launch a supported game. That's too bad; both Steam and Xfire show you what games your friends are playing so that you can select which one to join, but GFWL makes you launch a game that you might not want to play if your friends aren't there already.

Grabbing *GTA: IV* multiplayer as an exclusive is a big deal, as well as a huge test for Microsoft—*Halo 2* and *Shadowrun* both suffered major connectivity issues. On Xbox Live, *GTA IV* is as smooth as a peach; we'll expect the same on the PC. Fail there, Microsoft and, frankly, you'll never be taken seriously by gamers again. ☒

MEANWHILE...

Since we last covered Xfire, the service has added automatic screenshot uploads and video recording to its remarkable roster of features, which include in-game IM, voice chat, and clan support. Steam has a full set of community and friend tools as well, along with a bulging store already favored by gamers. Plus, Steam Cloud will soon allow you to access your saved games anywhere in the world. The competition for your friendslist is as high as ever.



EVAN LAHTI
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

ZOMBIE MODS

If you haven't popped by L4D Mods (<http://l4dmods.com>), do so. The web's best burgeoning community for after-market additions to *Left 4 Dead* is home to skins, sounds, and scripts to customize your zombie experience, in addition to helpful tutorials on mapmaking basics.

The community's greatest undertaking is an ambitious new custom campaign called *Dead After Dawn*, modeled after and inspired by the Crossroads Mall complex from *Dawn of the Dead*, the 2004 remake of George Romero's (and my personal favorite) classic zombie film. A modded movie remake might sound suspect, but consider this: the map's been five years in the making, originally intended for *No Room In Hell*, a *Half-Life 2* mod.

I had a chance to chat with the campaign's creator, Stephan Botha, over Steam. Botha is planning a five chapter structure for the campaign, but has plans to implement a unique mechanic—randomized maps. If all goes according to plan once Valve unveils the Software Development Kit for *L4D*, the middle three chapters will have three maps each, and players will begin at a random area at the start of those sections. Replayability ahoy!

To mirror *Left 4 Dead*, Botha's chugging away on code that randomly generates objects and entities (like trash cans and shopping carts) on the map. You can bet we're eager to see Zoey, Francis, Louis, and Bill fight their way through a food court.



/// Other classic zombie movie settings we'd like to see: a museum, theme park, shipping dock, theater, or military bunker. ///

PREVIEWS



/// Starbreeze's four tenets for *Dark Athena*? First-person fighting, exploration, stealth, and shooting. ///

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ASSAULT ON DARK ATHENA

RELEASE DATE:
SPRING 2009

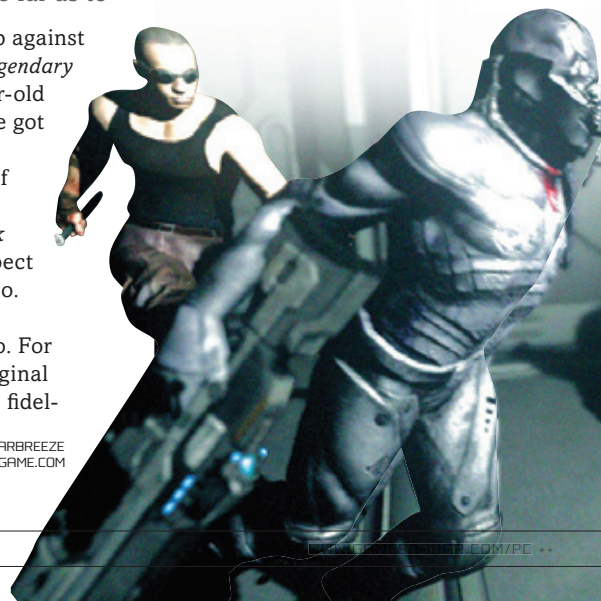
■ RIDDICK REMIXED, RELOADED, AND REVITALIZED

The original Riddick game, *Escape from Butcher Bay*, was a mighty, brutal accomplishment on the PC. Bump-mapping and broken necks littered its shadowy space prison halls, and the mix of stealth and shooter was unusually satisfying. Yet despite all the praise and appreciation for what it did as a movie-based game, we'd go so far as to

say it's *still* underrated. Hold it up against current action underdogs like *Legendary* and *Damnation*, and the four-year-old game barely shows its age. We've got our fingers crossed that it'll look even better in this double-dose of a release. Starbreeze is calling it an "episodic expansion"—if *Dark Athena* does well, they say to expect a genuine sequel in the future, too.

THE GAME IS SPLIT into two. For starters, you'll get to play the original *Riddick* title, remastered with the fidel-

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: ACTION DEVELOPER: STARBREEZE PUBLISHER: ATARI URL: RIDDICKGAME.COM



/// Our incessant lobbying for more mechs is finally producing results. *F.E.A.R. 2* will have 'em, too. ///

ity of Starbreeze's 2009 game engine, a technology that saw its first outing with Xbox 360 shooter *The Darkness*. *Athena*, on the other hand, is its own full-length campaign, a sequel to *BB* with all-new material. It follows Riddick aboard an evil mercenary ship. Nasty things are happening to the people captured by the vessel, and it's up to Vinny to dispense some embloodied space justice as he escapes its clutches himself.

If it pans out, it'd be a genuine buy-one-get-one-free. That's good news for those of you who missed out on *Butcher Bay*—the prison planet's cells are more detailed and more squalid than ever. For the rest of us, think of this remake as "a love letter to fans of the original," says producer Anthony DeLuca. He explains that the game has been completely rebuilt for the current tech—although the lauded violence remains intact. He proves this

by showing us a nasty assault on a guard, slicing a throat to the stomach-churning sound of metal tearing flesh.

We were also shown the improved melee of *Dark Athena*, as Riddick tackles an armored "ghost drone" with a pair of razor-sharp hooks. The new engine supports exact body damage, so you'll see where your blows land. Even more grim are the killing moves: Riddick makes sure his adversaries are dead, battering their already broken bodies. The blood quotient is large enough to draw offers for in-game ads from the Red Cross.

AT ONE STAGE Riddick body tackles a crew member, punting him down a shaft. The move seems appropriate for any situation. Need to get through a door? Dive tackle. Need to eat a sandwich? Dive tackle. Riddick reads just as cruel and resourceful as we remember him, clearing sections of the ship with disposable soldiers. We see him pilot one drone into a spinning fan—with grisly consequences—before he leaps consciousness back to another drone, and continues through the duct and onward into the ship. Brutal and fun. That's the Riddick we know and love.

These glimpses of the new campaign assure us that the Starbreeze team is at the peak of its powers. Half the game might be a remake of a confirmed classic,

/// Rid awakes from cryostasis on the *Athena* grumpy and ready to stab. ///



/// Necromongers, a cult among many factions in the Riddickverse, believe life in the universe was a mistake. ///



/// Catch Mr. Diesel next summer in the thrilling sequel, *8 Fast 8 Furious: Guatemalan Drift*. ///



/// Budda-budda-budda. Vin's contract demands that he fire an assault rifle at least once every half hour. ///

but the Swedish developer is also throwing loads of ideas at their new game. Voiced once again by Vin Diesel, Starbreeze promises to live up to the enormously high standard it's set for the sci-fi cult hero, and itself. ■ JIM ROSSIGNOL ■

■ HOPES/FEARS ■

+ After an acquisition spree, *Riddick* stands with *Ghostbusters* as Atari's new flagship titles, so we'd expect Starbreeze to get significant publisher support to make the game all it should be. Re-rendering *Butcher Bay* in the new engine means, theoretically, there'll be at least one excellent game on the disc.

— Is it wrong to be worried about a remake being too derivative? We've seen an influx of dark games set in enclosed settings, and the early masked future troopers and dimly lit aesthetic seems very *F.E.A.R.* with a sprinkle of *BioShock*.



/// The Steel Ronin are smaller Empire mechs focused on area-of-effect damage and quick strikes, using laser glaives to create shockwave strikes. ///

RED ALERT 3: UPRISING

RELEASE DATE:
Q2 2009

■ THE COMMIES ARE GETTING UPPITY IN A STAND-ALONE EXPANSION

After getting early word that EA is releasing a *Red Alert 3* expansion with four new campaigns (each with three to four missions), we called Senior Producer Amer Ajami and demanded answers to our burning questions.

PCG: Which of *Red Alert 3*'s three endings does *Uprising* assume really happened?

AMER AJAMI: *Uprising* continues the timeline according to the Allies' particular version of the game's events. Truth be told, we tried flipping a coin, but we realized we still liked the idea of the Soviets being the underdogs, and the Empire of the Rising Sun losing the chip off their collective shoulder.

The stories of *Uprising* are told in the aftermath of the *RA3* war, with the Soviet Union reel-

ing from the crushing defeat of its scheming leaders, and the Empire of the Rising Sun struggling to regain its honor and identity. The Allies will have their own new problems to deal with, too.

Are any of the game mechanics (such as the new harvesters) being tweaked or revised?

The core mechanics of *Uprising* are going to be largely similar to those of the base game. We're happy with how easy it is for players to set up a base and get an economy rolling in, and want to keep the spotlight on intense, fast-paced tactical battles. We've got several powerful new units available to each faction, some of which can serve as the cornerstone of new build orders and overarching strategies. We've placed an increased importance on some of the secondary structures in the game to allow players more lateral teching options. Apart from that, we've

"IT'S IMPORTANT TO US TO SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITY WITH ONGOING UPDATES, SO THEY KNOW THEY'LL BE GETTING A LOT OF VALUE."

made lots of tweaks to the returning units and interface; many of these changes have already been patched into *Red Alert 3*. It's important to us to support our community with ongoing updates, so they know they'll be getting a lot of value for their money from our new releases.

What types of new units can we expect to see in *Uprising*?

We've added 11 new units, ranging from low-tier infantry to third-tier heavy-hitting behemoths. We wanted to create toys that our audience would find fun and engaging, but more importantly, we wanted units to fill some gaps in the tech trees of all three existing factions. For example, the new Archer Maiden addresses the Empire of the Rising Sun's relatively insufficient anti-aircraft weaponry in their early game.

The Cryo Legionnaire is a spin on *RA2*'s Chrono Legionnaire (a unit that many fans of that game wanted to see in *RA3*). He's effective at freezing both groups of infantry and individual vehicles. Once frozen, the Cryo's victims face certain death at the hands (or feet, actually) of his secondary stomp ability. He's also one of the most micro-intensive units we've created. We've also given Yuriko (who, not coincidentally, is one of our favorite units from *RA3*) a suite of new abilities. There are story considerations that we don't want to give away just yet, but suffice it to say that she has received a significant buff and a campaign of her own.

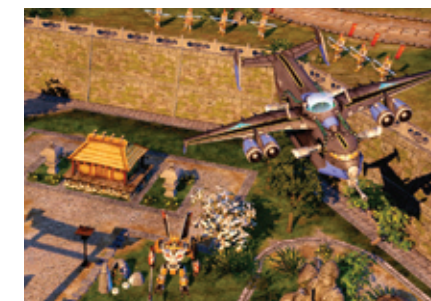
Will there be new gameplay modes?

We're introducing the new Commander's Challenge mode, which is a lengthy series of unique, themed scenarios. Each of these has its own special rules or conditions, limiting access to your units. As you complete each scenario, you'll unlock new forces to add to the mix. This is proving to be an addictive and fun means of structuring our gameplay, so we'll be excited to see how players take to it.

Why go with a stand-alone game rather than a traditional expansion pack? Does this mean *Uprising* will cost more?

It's quite simple, really. We want to give as many gamers as possible the opportunity to play. And no, that certainly doesn't mean that *Uprising* will cost more. In fact, the downloadable version of *Uprising* will be priced at around \$20 for roughly 30 hours of gameplay (including the campaigns and Commander's Challenge).

/// DAN STAPLETON ///



/// The Allied Harbinger Gunship circles around its target and pummels it to dust. ///



/// Desolator troopers carry squirtguns loaded with liquid radiation to irradiate enemies and land. ///

REINFORCEMENTS HAVE ARRIVED

THREE NEW SUPER-UNITS



SOVIETS

Stalin's steamroller, **The Grinder**, enjoys crushing enemy vehicles (including tier three crushers like the Apocalypse Tank) and structures. Rollin' over opponents doesn't slow The Grinder down, and it's also fully amphibious.



ALLIES

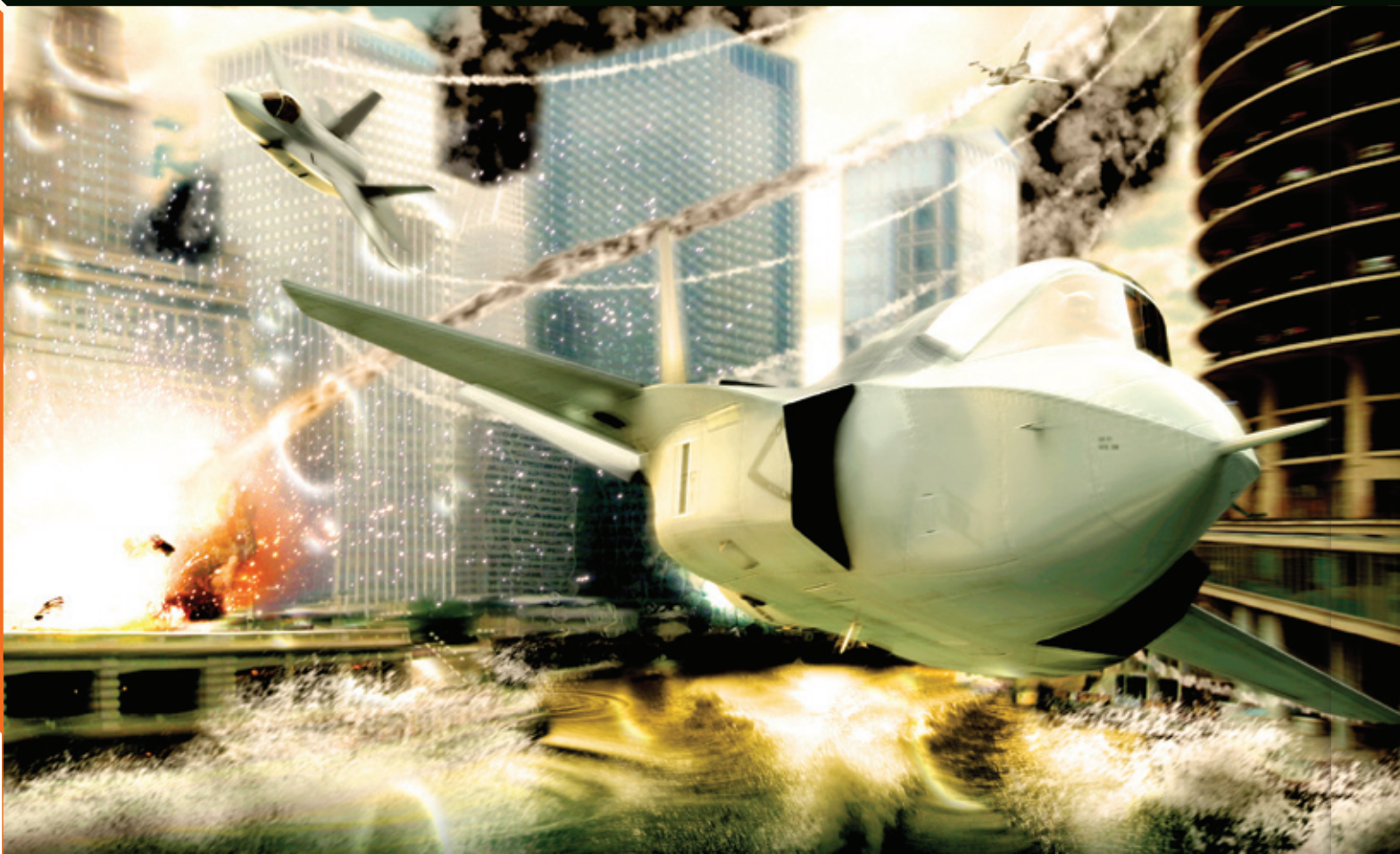
Behold, the **Future Tank X-1**: the "boss" unit of the FutureTech themed sub-faction in the Allied campaign. Its heavy armor excels against all ground units, but particularly slow ground units that cannot evade its primary attack.



EMPIRE OF THE RISING SUN

The largest vehicle in *RA3*, this **Giga-Fortress** can transform into a flying siege platform, switching out its weapons system to favor siege cannons in the process. It's also able to blast the coastline with its rocket launcher and cannon turrets. When transforming from water to sky and back, it will crush any stationary units in its way.

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: REAL-TIME STRATEGY DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES PUBLISHER: EA URL: COMMANDANDCONQUER.COM



TOM CLANCY'S HAWX

RELEASE DATE:
SPRING 2009

KICK THE TIRES AND LIGHT THE FIRES

We're sampling *HAWX*'s four-player co-op campaign. So far, me and my three living, breathing wingmen have put in a dogged rather than a daz-zling performance. Twice we've narrowly failed to stop a flock of fighters, frigates, and hovercraft from sinking our fleet. Twice we've come this close to

preventing a combined force of bombers, helo gunships, and tanks from waxing our oil refinery.

Well, strictly speaking, it wasn't *our* oil refinery or fleet that got trashed. *HAWX* casts you as an employee of Artemis Global Security, a PMC that hires its warriors out to any government with deep enough pockets. It's a neat device: Instead of spending the whole campaign staring down at Genersistan, you get to trot the globe. New contracts mean new, usually lovely, horizons, and new victims for your heat-hungry missiles. And your heat-hungry missiles claim a lot of victims in this game. In my last sky skirmish I must have downed at least a dozen bogeys in the space of a couple of minutes. Exciting? Certainly.

Unrealistic? Hell yes. The devs may, as they claim, have worked hand-in-glove with top fighter fabricators such as Lockheed Martin, Saab, and Boeing, but whatever realism they've built into the flight models is totally undermined by little details like every plane going into battle with enough missiles to sink a small Caribbean island.

THE LACK OF AUTHENTICITY isn't necessarily a negative. For years the PC has been crying out for a fast, furious, friendly jet combat title. We've had heavy-weights like *Falcon 4.0* and *Lock On*, and no end of lite WWII flight fare, but no *Ace Combat*. *HAWX* may fill the triangular void nicely. Hopefully, at the very least some serious sim designers will play it and nick a



/// Ubisoft has advertised a jump in, jump out system for competitive multiplayer modes. ///



/// Pull up! Watch your six! Air combat has produced many of our era's best catchphrases. ///



/// Harriers' famous vertical take-off and landing capability made them the first fighters that allowed pilots to teabag foes. ///

I MUST HAVE DOWNED AT LEAST A DOZEN BOGEYS IN THE SPACE OF A COUPLE OF MINUTES. EXCITING? CERTAINLY. UNREALISTIC? HELL YES.

few of its cleverer ideas. Ideas like ERS. In Sir Clancy's technophilic near-future, pilots don't need to plan complex aerial maneuvers for themselves. They simply activate their Enhanced Reality System then steer their steeds through the dynamically plotted HUD hoops. Instead of trusting to instinct and random stick wagging to shake a locked-on missile, you dab Shift and the optimum trajectory materializes in front of you. Brilliant. All flight sims need ERS in their training segments.

The assistance mode is a great idea too. When activated it smooths your aerobatics and stops you committing that aviation faux pas, the stall. Deactivate it and you can turn sharper, climb steeper, and brake harder. Strangely, what you can't do while flying au naturel is remain in the cockpit. The camera instantly switches to a cinematic third-person perspective. Hmmm.

There are a few faintly worrying aspects to the design: a total lack of landings, take-offs, and ejections, the reliance on missile-based mayhem... And yet the game is so drenched in turn-and-burn, so chockablock with sidewinder slaughter, that none of this may matter. Like falcons in the jetstream, we may end up irresistibly swept along. Right now, it's hard to tell whether *HAWX* is going to soar like an eagle, or flutter like a peanut-stuffed blue tit when released. ///TIM STONE ///



/// "Stay on target...stay on target..." ///

HOPES/FEARS

+ There's a serious void for accessible flight (or even space) combat on the PC, and the promise of four-player co-op throughout the campaign has us already brainstorming callsigns. Also, F-22s are awesome.

- Will the lack of authenticity make it feel like an action game that happens to take place in the air? Omitting staples like take-offs and landings is unfortunate.

WHICH WARBIRO?

NAME THESE THREE HAWX FLYABLES AND WIN AN AMAZING PRIZE*



My engines are made in England, and my name makes me sound like a bland European superhero. In 2001 and 2004, I had two flight sims published to my name.



I'm found in Chinese, Indian, and Russian hangars, and my NATO moniker rhymes with "wanker." Eagle Dynamics has simulated me in all three of their sims.



I have the radar profile of an emaciated paper plate and can fly at speeds of up to Mach 1.82. I cost \$138 million to make, and use an internal bay to hold missiles and bombs.

*An AIM-9 Sidewinder missile, delivered to the mailbox of your choice via F-22edEx.

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: FLIGHT COMBAT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT PUBLISHER: UBISOFT URL: HAWXGAME.COM

JUMP GATE EVOLUTION

RELEASE DATE:
Q3 2009

■ MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER OUTERSPACE ACTION

You don't wash your dishes with a lawnmower. Even if they're encrusted with a week's worth of shameful burrito negligence, you do it the right way: Let them soak and steep, hoping that the grime frees itself overtime. It's an inelegant metaphor, but one that applies to the ambitious design

MMO house NetDevil has planned. They've merged two seemingly dissimilar, dirty things together (an MMO experience and real-time space combat gameplay), and now it's a matter of immersing them in enough development to produce a clean product.

How do you join character persistency with twitchy sci-fi dogfighting? It helps to have done it before—*Evolution* is a sequel to the original *Jumpgate*, an MMO the dev released in 2001 that remains adored by many communities (and is still up-and-running), but didn't gather much momentum because its publisher, 3DO, barely supported it. The remake is similar—not mathy or plodding like *EVE Online*, but more of a cockpit-and-crosshairs experience. No hotbar. No ability cooldowns. No filing through dense menus to set a course between sectors. It's an MMO for folks (like me) who miss the charming barrel rolls and tense missile locks of *Wing Commander*, but it's laden with enough persistency to let you fly coop-

erative missions and develop your character up to captaining capital ships.

WE BEGIN AS A member of the Solrain Commonwealth, the power-hungriest and most corporate of *Jumpgate's* three playable factions. We scan a nebula to uncover a pirate probe cloaked inside the red haze, which bugs the pirates enough to zip a few squads of red, claw-shaped ships at us. Minutes in, we're blasting Infernals (the pirate faction), lasering enough red and green into their weak scouts to crack hulls. The comfortably shootery strafing and ship mobility stood out; moving our fighter laterally with WASD feels just as responsive as forward movement. We upgraded to a different vessel after that, asking Net-

Devil to pull up a higher-level pilot that's purchased enough licenses to equip big guns (*Jumpgate* won't use a class system for characters). We circle-strafe a tall space station in our corvette, lobbing mortars at the station's individual turrets, then its power generator, dealing splash damage all the while.

It's these action-oriented moments that reassure us that *Jumpgate* will center itself on active gameplay. Even mining resources off asteroids is made more engaging—you're not auto-targeting a lumbering space pebble, but seeking out little nuggets along the asteroid's surface, then zapping them with your resource ray. And now that we've got a feel for the cockpit, we'll definitely report back once the *Jumpgate* beta hits around Q2 of this year, after we've gathered an idea of how developing a character integrates with

PvP, forming alliances, and *Jumpgate's* player-driven economy.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///



/// Jumpgates bloom and distort space...and time continuums, we're told. ///



/// Ship graveyards, foggy nebulae, ice and asteroids fields, and planets with glowing halos of atmosphere fill *Jumpgate's* color-saturated sectors. ///

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: MMORPG DEVELOPER: NETDEVIL PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS URL: JUMPGATEEVOLUTION.COM

■ HOPES/FEARS ■

+ Aside from the mech genre, space combat is a gaping black hole in PC gaming we desperately want filled. Mixing real-time combat with MMO persistency hits a great note. Proposed extras like in-game radio stations could make cruising empty space less mind-numbing.

- What we saw was light on lore and context—staples of the genre like pop-up radio avatars need to be included, and we didn't have a clear sense of the factions' intentions or personality.



DRAGON AGE

ORIGINS

/// BY EVAN LAHTI ///

Regret, anger, injustice. Revenge.

IN LESS THAN THREE HOURS, I'd been appointed commander of a dwarven army, only to be tricked by a member of the royal council into committing fratricide—killing my brother, the true heir to the throne. I have unseated my father's kingship over the dwarven capital of Orzammar. I have disgraced my house. I am an exile from my people. And now my innards are roiled with gut-wrenching emotions—feelings that are perhaps more valuable to my dwarven warrior than any stat bonus or new skill I'd earned. Uncertainty looms: Could I have chosen wiser words to convince my brother not to fight me? Would I have an opportunity to return to Orzammar and confront Bhelen—the conniving, conspiring council member—for his betrayal? The weight of my actions had me eager to round up new quests that I hoped would lead me to redemption. I craved a resolution to the plot that I had set in motion, that destroyed everything I held dear.

I'm recounting one of the most impactful stories I've experienced in a game, and I haven't even started the main quest. I'm the first person to play *Dragon Age: Origins*—spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*, crafted by the capable hands of one of the finest RPG-smiths of the modern era, BioWare. I've completed one of the six discrete origin stories that build a foundation for hundreds of choices that genuinely affect the game's fantasy world. It's an ambitious design, but it puts *Dragon Age* on track to be the most narratively complex, personal, and replayable RPGs out of the studio yet.



KNOW YOUR ROLE

ROLE-PLAYERS RELISH character creation. It's that beautiful blank slate—that special time when the imagination can forge an entire history with a few clicks, where your mental image of a daring rogue hits the page in the form of high dexterity, archery training, and dropping a dozen points into his lockpicking skill. But there's character creation, and then there's *character creation*. Think about it—does choosing whether you're a dwarf or an elf, assigning stat points into fire magic, or tweaking bone structure sliders really tell you who you are, establish your motivation, or develop a foundation for the choices you make?

Our decisions shape us and the world around us—that's always been BioWare's thesis, and *Dragon Age: Origins* may be the most ambitious, fully realized expression of the developer's vision for personalized storytelling and player choice. BioWare believes that players need to ease into their character's skin, not hop into a pre-drafted hero with just a cutscene to contextualize their actions. This theory materializes in the six distinct introductory "origin stories": players choose from a dwarf commoner, dwarven noble, city elf, magi, human noble, and Dalish elf. Filling one of these roles gives players the opportunity to make formative, significant decisions that forge a distinct background for their character before graduating to the main quest.

For my dwarven noble—the first character I chose during *PC Gamer*'s world-exclusive playtest—those decisions rest in unraveling a plot of political intrigue rife with double-crosses, assassination, and sibling rivalry. I'm the second eldest son of the king of Orzammar, the larger of two known remaining dwarf cities. Today, I'm receiving my military commission to become a commander, raising my prestige among brothers, cousins, and other houses that compete for power. My loyal companion, Gorim, reminds me that there's a feast in my honor in the evening, and that the king expects me to attend. Picking through dialog options (rendered by *Mass Effect*'s smooth, cinematic conversation engine), I decide to shrug off the schedule, and make my way to an event called The Proving—an opportunity to roam the underground city and get acquainted with my bearded brethren.

VITALS GENRE: RPG DEVELOPER: BOWARE EDMONTON PUBLISHER: EA URL: DRAGONAGE.COM

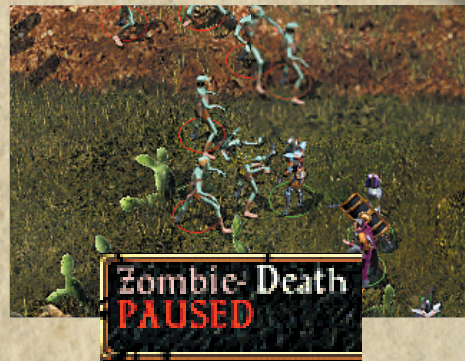


/// How will you influence the ever-changing game of dwarven politics? My decisions during my origin story shaped the future of the underground dwarf capital, Orzammar. ///

BALDUR'S SPIRIT

BioWare doesn't own the license to *Baldur's Gate* (Atari does), but that doesn't limit the dev from iterating on the core mechanics and charm that the party-driven fantasy RPG offered. Here's three features that help it qualify—and surpass—it's spiritual-successor status.

■ **BG's pausable combat system** was a landmark for tactical RPGs, and *Dragon Age* wants to recreate that same sense of combat orchestration. Advanced players will appreciate *DA*'s customizable party tactics system—an integrated way of scripting combat behavior for your allies. Have your rogue auto-heal you if your health drops to a certain percentage; have your mage boost your party's melee damage with his flaming weapons spell whenever you cast drain life on an enemy. Programming custom AI for your party-mates builds on the tactical complexity *BG* put forth.



■ Being bound to the **AD&D ruleset** meant *Baldur's Gate*'s character creation, combat equations, spells, skills, and lore were modeled after pre-existing material: some RPG newbies were alienated by the system, and hardcore pen-and-paper players got fussy about minor rule alterations. Building *Dragon Age* from the ground up frees BioWare to create fresh fantasy and introduce combat mechanics like spell combos, which encourage mages to tag-team to produce devastating effects with their magic.

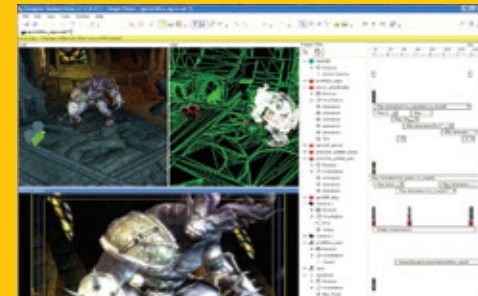


DIY DRAGON

Deets on *DA*'s campaign creation toolset

Following in the tradition of *Neverwinter Nights*, *Dragon Age: Origins* will ship with a campaign creation toolset. This won't be an app that BioWare dumbs down to make more user-friendly, but a robust suite with levers, buttons, and options aplenty. Players can use the plot editor to flag different quest conditions, create unique NPCs with customized clothing and facial models, and script up their own branching dialog trees for those characters. "We really want to grow that community and empower them to create lots of really cool content. We hope that it'll be part of long legs for the title much like *Neverwinter*, which we still have some new modules coming in for even now. If we get even half of that kind of community success with *Dragon Age*, we'll be very happy," says Fernando Melo, producer at BioWare.

How deep is the toolset? It's nearly identical to what BioWare used to make *Dragon Age*, only with most of their internal architecture extracted. "There are some limitations that will be there at the start. We'll be expanding it over time, but straight away, players will be able to take all the areas we have in the game and repurpose them, drop in any of the items and objects they have in the game. Scripting has been completely opened up. Scripting in particular is hugely powerful—I think more than any of our previous games, including *NW*, we've exposed a lot more of the game logic and combat and character creation—all of these things are scripted," says Ross Gardner, lead programmer on *DA*.



/// Pick what weapons enemies wield, draft plot arcs and cutscenes—*DA*'s toolset is impressively deep. ///

The toolset will also include a cutscene editor, letting you frame boss fights, dramatic dialog, or whatever in-game action suits your fancy. "It basically takes all of the lessons we've learned in terms of digital acting over the years, takes it up a notch, and drops it in there live. The amount of stuff users will be able to create in that alone we hope will be really, really good, especially for machinima users. You'll have an impressive amount of control and flexibility at your fingertips," says Dean Andersen, lead art director. We're pleased by the decision to integrate campaign sharing directly into the game, so you won't have to cruise forum communities for user-created content. Better, BioWare intends to support the toolset over time and add new objects, assets, and modules.

DRAGON AGE

ORIGINS



/// Beards, also known as "face armor" in dwarven culture, can be customized. ///



/// Beware! Poison traps tend to trigger at inopportune times, like your wedding night. ///

PROVING GROUNDS

WITH GORIM IN TOW, I take my dwarven noble and WASD my way through well-lit royal corridors—the gold-plated torches tell me these dwarves are a little more regal, more refined than their mining counterparts in Tolkien and other fantasy fare. We enter the Diamond Quarter, a long passageway lined with shops. Now here's something you don't see every day: two dwarves arguing over literature. "This worm has written a book that slanders my house!" a noble claims as I approach. I click through a few screens of dialog to get the details—the citizen has written a controversial screed about one of the paragons, the living legends elected by the dwarven council who are meant to be revered by all. Indicting a paragon could be a serious offense.

The historian shoots back: "Not liking history doesn't make it any less true." And then I'm faced with a choice: Preserve his right to publish, or protect the name of the noble's paragon and his house? Not fond of censorship, I pick the most extreme option before me: order Gorim to have the noble assassinated. Gorim nods, darts off, and returns a moment later. "Word has been sent. He won't live past the hour." I cackle. In my mind, I twirl the curls of my massive beard. Less than 10 minutes in, I've ordered someone completely innocent (albeit annoying) to his death. Could more amoral decisions await? I can only hope.

At the end of the corridor, a few guards escort

me to The Provings, an arena-style dueling tournament that's being held in my honor. But I'm not interested in merely being a bystander. It's time for me to get my hands dirty, and what better place to do so than in front of hundreds of commoners? I insist to the announcer that it's well within my right to compete, and he obliges, introducing me to the sphere of spectators.

I'm dropped into the pit. My opponent offers a salute for the honor of fighting against me, but I don't hold back, right-clicking to target him as soon as we enter combat. My dwarf lumbers forth, waving his sword intermittently. The looseness of the controls and easy strafing feels familiar, like *World of Warcraft*. The hit detection is based in dice rolls more than actual impact, too—I try to back-

pedal and dodge, but my opponent's war hammer clubs me anyway, so I stand my ground, hovering over the hotkey for my shield-bash ability while I watch it recharge. We play rock 'em sock 'em dwarves until his life bar empties, just narrowly before mine.

Blood cakes my grandfather's ceremonial armor (thanks to *Dragon Age's* persistent gore modeling) and I smile beneath my beard as I leave The Provings. But my victory smirk is soon wiped clean when a council member named Bhelen shares disturbing news: Trian, my elder brother, plans to kill me after my commission ceremony because he's worried my promotion might threaten his ascendancy to the throne. I tell Bhelen that I'm not out to claim the heirship, but suddenly my origin story is showing shades of King Lear.

What *Dragon Age's* Got

- ✓ "Different" DRM than *Mass Effect*
- ✓ DLC—new areas and quests, at the least
- ✓ More written dialog than any BioWare game
- ✓ Spell combos
- ✓ Item crafting
- ✓ Six origin stories
- ✓ Campaign creation toolset
- ✓ Choose-your-own-morality
- ✓ Epic dwarven beards
- Multiplayer
- ✓ Leading on the PC, not consoles



BROTRAYAL

DRAGON AGE MIGHT BE dungeons and dwarves on the surface, but the common-place fantasy archetypes belie the massive scale of the story. BioWare aims to offer a highly personal experience, allowing you to approach the game from six different perspectives, all of which vary even more depending on your decisions. “We want to ease the player into it and give them a bit of perspective according to whether you’re a dwarf or an elf or what your circumstances are—learn about the world through that character’s eyes before you actually enter the plot,” adds David Gaider, lead writer. The result? The most dialogue BioWare has ever put in a game, along with a replayable entry point for the vastest narrative the studio has ever produced.

Returning to the noble halls of the dwarf kingdom, I learn that the feast celebrating my appointment as a commander also falls on the eve of a great battle against the darkspawn, the evil army that plagues the land of Ferelden. It’s been 400 years since the last Blight, a period when the



/// If he'd sprung for squeeze-proof armor, this rogue wouldn't have found himself being Barbie for an ogre. ///



/// Duncan leads the Grey Wardens, a centuries-old group of adventurers that unite to fight the darkspawn. ///

/// Don't let their cavity-free jaws fool you. Darkspawn never floss. ///



BiOWARE ORIGINS

Every dwarf has his origin story, and so does every developer. How did the minds behind *Dragon Age* come to be at BioWare?

Dan Tudge

Project Director

“My first full time job was for my father, an electrical contractor in my hometown of Parksville, British Columbia, Canada. It was 1979, I was paid \$1 per hour and I spent every penny I earned in the arcade.”

Mike Laidlaw

Lead Designer

“For me, it was as simple as growing up as a farm boy with pretty nasty allergies. It was a great way to grow up, but I’m a LOT less stuffed up as a game designer.”

Fernando Melo

Producer

“After moving on from my initial dream of flying military aircraft, I spent a few years meandering through a bank job thing (as in paid labor, not the heist kind), the vacuum salesman thing, the virtual reality thing, the IT thing, the children’s online entertainment industry thing, the dotcom thing, the game publishing thing...and finally the game dev thing that I know and love today: BioWare and *Dragon Age: Origins*!”

darkspawn awakens an ancient dragon and makes a big mess of things for mankind. Much of the lore surrounding the darkspawn is a secret, but BioWare revealed to us that the dark coalition can corrupt mortals, converting their forms into evil equivalents. Corrupted dwarves become genlocks, the greenskinned foot soldiers of the darkspawn; tainted humans transform into hurlocks—zombielike marauders. “There’s not a whole lot of redeeming qualities about the darkspawn,” lead designer Mike Laidlaw points out. “They’re largely out to eat your liver, preferably while it’s still inside you.”

With this lump in my throat, dear old kingly dad sends me on a special mission: retrieve the shield of the legendary paragon Aeducan from a forgotten tomb far inside the Deep Roads, the networked tunnels that linked the dwarven kingdoms long ago before many were destroyed. I navigate the long caves, swapping between the members of my modestly armed party to clear out the gemlocks and giant spiders that clog the tunnels. I keep the raids I ran in *WoW* and *Warhammer Online* fresh in my mind—ability cooldowns, critical hits, and spell combos give combat a pace that feels balanced between being turn-based and active. You’re able to use an over-the-shoulder view to maneuver characters into



precise position with WASD, and pause at any time to assign commands. I found at least one benefit to the real-time controls when I moved behind the last genlock, executing a backstab automatically to deal bonus damage.

Further down the Deep Roads, a band of mercenaries has already reached Aeducan’s tomb. They only could have entered the shrine by using my brother Trian’s signet ring. The plot suddenly seems all too clear: Trian sent these goons to eliminate me and recover the shield so he could claim glory and clear his path to kingship in one fell swoop. I make quick work of the mercs, locate the shield, and stomp back to our rendezvous, ready to confront Trian, who seems convinced that I have a plot to murder him to take his heir. I chalk it up to jealousy and paranoia, and tell him I won’t surrender and stand trial—I’ve done nothing wrong. Trian echoes my defiance: “Nothing, not even my treacherous kin, will stop me from claiming my right!”

THE CAMERA PEELS BACK over my shoulder into combat. There’s no avoiding it now—either Trian dies, or I do. I jab the spacebar to pause and scan the scene: three archers, two armed dwarves, and Trian himself, waving a heavy war hammer. I opt for the tactical view, flicking the mouse wheel to zoom out for an isometric eye of the situation. From up high, I can plot attacks, abilities, and movement at my own pace. I’m ruining enemies with my brain power, and BioWare says that’s the plan. “There’s a very strong element of kicking ass, like: Hey, there are things over there with red circles—*they will die*,” says Laidlaw, playfully. “That’s the balance—having this neat story but also keeping it accessible so you don’t get overwhelmed

by it, because there are times when you just wanna slaughter.” Pulling the camera back to click out orders, it’s easy to send an archer to a hilltop or a soldier to square off against a single irksome foe. Laidlaw wants players to feel like they’re orchestrating the combat, not just one sword and shield among a fray of foes. “That certainly goes back to the *Baldur’s Gate* experience,” Laidlaw says.

I swap two of my characters’ swords for bows, and point their pinning shot abilities at separate targets—disabling two enemies should give me enough time to focus some strikes on one of the guards. After four failed attempts, I manage to group fire on the archers early in the battle, dodging enough of Trian’s attacks to deal a finishing blow that decapitates my brother. Dwarfitality!

My father arrives on the scene too late. “My son, tell me this isn’t what it looks like, before my heart tears itself apart,” he pleads. He thinks that I’ve killed Trian to assure my spot as heir, but I argue my innocence. I fought in self-defense—Trian was the one who wanted me dead. He questions my partymates—they saw me take Trian’s signet ring from the mercenaries, they’d be my alibi. Instead, my archer lies: “Lord Aeducan came up to them all friendly-like, then when we were close he wanted us to attack.” The other soldier echoes his slander. I’ve been tricked! My party members were Bhelen’s cronies, meant to assure that I killed Trian, eliminating any witnesses while assuring my guilt. Bhelen set Trian and I against one another, relying on our distrust to clear his path to power. As judgment, I’m stripped of my nobility, and cast into the Dark Roads with only a sword and shield, exiled to fight darkspawn until my doom...



WHEEL OF MORALITY

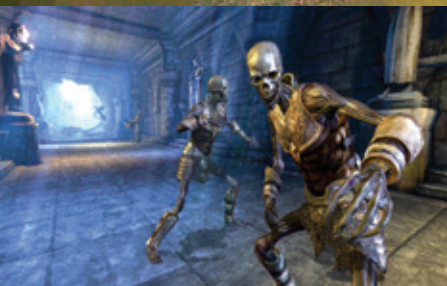
BIOWARE IS BRINGING SIX total origin stories to *Dragon Age*: dwarf commoner, dwarven noble, city elf, Dalish elf, magi, and human noble. The pair we played showed promise—neither wasted time dropping big decisions in my lap, nor did they bog me down with petty errands simply to fill my EXP bar. Whether I was confronting family politics or recovering the forgotten history of my race as a Dalish elf, minutes into each, I was facing problems with true consequences.

And that's really the idea. The origins are designed to evoke the feel of your race and social status, and naturally establish your character's perspective. You're not going to be dealing with caste politics as an elf of the woods. You won't be worried by racial tension or the trials of becoming a magic user when you're a dwarven noble.

You can think of them as separate starting points—six threads that that run parallel and intersect as you continue on a shared, but different, main quest path: becoming a Grey Warden, one of the legendary guardians against the darkspawn. You emerge from your origin having made hard, formative decisions that plant seeds for the rest of the plot. In turn, this means more complexity for player choice and party dynamics down the road. Party members will weigh in on your choices, and even make the decision to leave your group if you offend them enough. But maybe best of all, you're not some run-of-the-mill knight that see-saws between good and evil based on which



/// Release the hounds! Mabari war dogs are valuable, adorable additions to your party. ///



/// Blinged-out skeletons lurk in elven catacombs, looting graves for 22" wagon rims. ///



/// The Blight's gory footprint crawls through areas as the darkspawn corrupts the land. ///



/// In the Dalish Elf origin, Tamlen (right) is your companion in battle and conscience for story decisions. ///

DALISHIOUS

Elves have a fragile relationship with humanity in the world of *Dragon Age*. Long ago, pointy-eared people were enslaved by mankind, and today are still treated as second-class citizens. The Dalish elves, one of two origin stories we played, are nomads seeking to recover their race's forgotten history by scouring Ferelden for relics and remnants of their people's past. The origin's opening scene frames the larger story of the Dalish. While hunting in the woods with a companion named Tamlen, you stumble upon three human travelers who claim to have found ruins and artifacts that bear elvish writing. Tamlen doesn't buy the story, and prompts you to make a decision.

It's here, four minutes into the origin story, that you're given your first important dialog choice. One option tells Tamlen to kill one of the humans, but let the other two run to remind others to keep away from our camp. It seemed impossibly harsh to be serious, so I pick it just for kicks, thinking Tamlen will simply fire a warning shot and we'd have a good laugh about it. (Had I forgotten the dwarven noble I'd killed in my other origin story?) The human pleads for mercy, but

Tamlen doesn't pause before planting an arrow in his guts, dropping him into the grass. Oops.

Combat-wise, playing as an elf rogue didn't feel too different than my dwarven warrior, though I only leveled once, so I couldn't unlock many abilities, talents, or specializations to flesh out my character. I still shot a bow and fought in close-quarters, but I did encounter poison traps, skeletons, and other natural enemies of HP within the elf ruins that I didn't see elsewhere. I won't spoil the rest of the Dalish origin, other than to say that I made friends with a grumpy spiked bear called a Bereskarn and may have stumbled on a magic mirror or two.



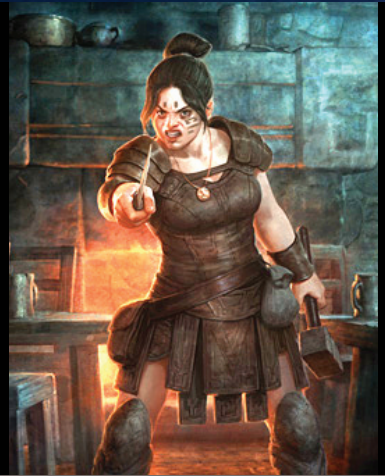
/// If Winnie the Pooh did it with a cactus, a Bereskarn would likely emerge. ///

peasants you decide to lend a hand to. "We wanted to make a story that had some moral complexity to it. Rather than saying 'here's your Good and Evil bar,' we can provide the player with options that will require him to think about what consequences they're willing to live with," says Gaider.

Along with the PC-friendly tactical

combat, it's this promise of complexity that excites us about *Dragon Age*—it's the first time I've seen a single-player RPG that lets me enter the world in a way that's tailored to my decisions from the start. Think of it this way: If Bethesda let players begin *Fallout 3* not as six different vault dwellers, but as a raider, Brotherhood of Steel soldier, Enclave stooge,

mercenary, or stay-at-home post-apocalypse homemaker, you might have a rough analog for what BioWare has in mind. Of course, the question remains: Can the rest of the game build upon the world-shaping decisions you make in your origin story? If it can, *Dragon Age: Origins* is on track to be a one of the most personal role-playing stories you'll ever experience. ☺



THE OTHER ORIGINS

Based on their chosen background, players enter *Dragon Age* on one of six separate story paths before kicking off the main quest. The city elf, Dalish elf, dwarven noble, human noble, and magi each begin with a different set of issues to deal with.



/// No tame tutorials here. Gut a few wolves and you're gauntlet-deep in dungeons within minutes. ///

Let the console cabal strut around on the flimsy floorboards that barely hide the limits of their smug little systems. Let the pundits proclaim (wrongly, yet again) the death of PC gaming. We here at PC Gamer know differently. Indeed, 2008 proved to be yet another banner year for the best system out there—and, in our humble estimation, the only way to really experience the

most gorgeous, most precise, and most innovative gameplay anywhere in the world. Be it the hostile wastelands of *Fallout 3* or the lush landscapes in *World of Warcraft*, PC gaming is awash with award-winning interactive entertainment. Following are the very best of the best. Now get going—you've got a lot of gaming to do if you haven't yet played them all!

GAME OF THE YEAR FALLOUT 3



LEAVING THE
VAULT

GREAT IDEAS NEVER DIE. It didn't matter that *Fallout* was a series that was silent for 10 years. The world and core mechanics of *Fallout 1* are so inherently awesome that they deserved to be done again, but in a new way. So much of reinventing something again is the presentation. Read old game reviews and see how the audience responded at the time, and find a way to make that happen again. Don't let anyone tell you "People no longer like that." What I wouldn't give to see *X-Wing* or *Wing Commander* reborn again.
Hmmm. —Todd Howard

IT TOOK A FULL DECADE TO HAPPEN, but the sequel to one of the most-beloved PC role-playing franchises finally arrived in 2008 and proved itself worth the wait. While it doesn't retain the isometric perspective or play like a turn-based tactical combat game, it perfectly captured the spirit of the first two *Fallouts*. As we wandered through the post-nuclear wasteland of Washington D.C. battling mutants and raiders and interacting with small communities of survivors trying to carve out a living in the harsh environment, we were awe-struck by a world overstuffed with outstanding occasions. From the first time the Vault door rolls open to your initial encounter with a 15-foot-tall mutated monster with eight-inch claws to a climactic ending battle that we won't spoil for you here, *Fallout 3* is a game you can't possibly experience by playing just once. It's all of these memorable moments—just a few of which are captured right here—that put *Fallout 3* ahead by a nose in the tough competition for this year's *PC Gamer* Game of the Year Award.

In an effort to give them huge egos, we asked Bethesda's Lead Producer Todd Howard and Lead Designer Emil Pagliarulo what they hope that other game developers learn from the success of *Fallout 3*.



ONLY BY PLAYING GAMES, and immersing themselves in this wonderful industry, will developers ever truly know what's good, what's bad, what's expected, what's what been done before, and what's fresh and exciting. You have to understand the industry you're serving.

There's a second component to that, and it sounds simple, but it's the toughest thing in the world: Devs, play your own games! And don't do it with blinders on. If you create gameplay and it sucks, be honest with yourself and make it

better. Because if you think back to best games ever made, one recurring theme is really apparent: They're playable and fun. And that's because whoever made those game wanted to create something they'd want to play.

I think this industry gets too wrapped up with demographics, focus testing, and genre classification. You know what gamers want? Good games. So find your passion, understand what your audience wants, and work your heart out to make it happen. — Emil Pagliarulo



AWARD: GAME OF THE YEAR
GAME: FALLOUT 3
DEVELOPER: BETHESDA
PUBLISHER: BETHESDA
REVIEWED: 91%, HOLIDAY '08



GAMES OF THE YEAR



With gorgeous lighting and detailed textures, *Tomb Raider: Underworld* is a game that deserves as much hardware as you can throw at it.

If you've ever been rock-climbing before, you know the feeling—faced with a challenging and dangerous new environment, it's hard to tell where to even begin. *Tomb Raider: Underworld* pits you against ruins, catacombs, and ancient vaults the size of football fields on land and at sea, and you spend much of your time making your way through their obstacles and traps hanging by your fingertips.

Underworld's most rewarding achievement is the way most navigable elements in the environment—including vines, rock protrusions, and ledges—are made easy to identify without looking goofy.

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PC GAMER
GAMES OF THE YEAR
WINNER!

AWARD: BEST ACTION GAME
GAME: *TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD*
PUBLISHER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
DEVELOPER: EIDOS
REVIEWED: 90%, JANUARY '09

MOST GAMES ARE LUCKY to pull off a single one, but in *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, scenes of jaw-dropping awe—the ones that force you to stop in your tracks just to take it all in—happen again and again. Lara bursts through stone doors, rappels vertical corridors, or turns a corner in a labyrinth of subterranean passageways and finds her next epic challenge towering in front of her, some parts cloaked in darkness, others drenched in light.

Hats off to Crystal Dynamics for delivering the year's most exhilarating action in a classic *Tomb Raider* adventure that balances as gracefully as Lara herself on the line between fantasy and realism.

BEST ACTION GAME

TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

BEST OF THE REST



/// You want some ham with that cheese? ///

BEST LINE IN A CUTSCENE

RED ALERT 3

General Krukov: "You see, Commander, while you were hiding behind the barricades in Leningrad, our enemy was thrusting deeply into the Motherland's tender nether regions."

BEST MAP

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Finally, a "Gold Rush" map that captures all the mayhem,

explosiveness, and land-stealing of the 1849 original. It brings back the gameplay that made VIP our favorite mode in the original *TF*.

BEST MUSIC GAME

AUDIOSURF

This engaging rhythm game brings music into the 21st century as a truly interactive entertainment (beyond just

singing along to the car radio, of course).

BEST REMAKE

CIVILIZATION IV: COLONIZATION

Sid Meier's 1994 classic strategy game's DOS-era graphics were looking a little long in the tooth, but Firaxis' remake captures the original's gameplay almost to the letter while looking like a million bucks on the *Civ IV* engine.

GAMES OF THE YEAR

BEST MMO

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

HOW DO YOU CAPTURE the grandeur of a living, breathing world with just a handful of meager words? *World of Warcraft* might not be the newest MMO around, but with its latest acclaimed expansion,

it retains its crown, stealing hours upon hours of our precious time. Just how big is WoW? We'll get out of the way and let the numbers do the talking.

11,000,000

POPULATION OF GREECE: **11,215,000**
WOW SUBSCRIBERS

\$200,000,000

Blizzard's total cost of running WoW since 2004

\$75,000

1st place in WoW arena tournament

\$46,326

Average household income (2005)

30%

REDUCTION IN XP NEEDED TO LEVEL SINCE LAST EXPANSION

11 CELEBRITY TV COMMERCIALS



CHEESE VARIETIES



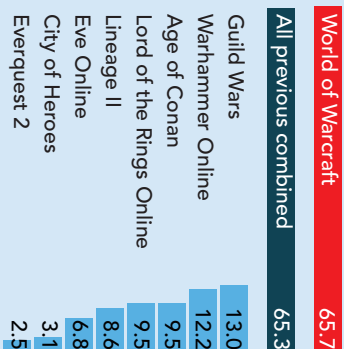
Currency Calculator

1,000	WoW gold
18	US Dollars
1,673	Japanese Yen
241	Mexican Pesos
30	Snickers bars
1.2	Months of WoW subscription

MAY 20, 2008

Massive banning of botters: 56,000 unofficially reported banned

GOOGLE SEARCH RESULTS (MILLIONS)



7954
QUESTS

627 SWORDS

"Most dangerous NPC" Loken kills **128,688** players each day

WRATH OF THE LICH KING LAUNCH DAY SALES

1,944
SOLD EVERY MINUTE

PC GAMER
GAMES OF THE YEAR
WINNER!

AWARD: BEST MMO
GAME: WORLD OF WARCRAFT
PUBLISHER: BLIZZARD
DEVELOPER: BLIZZARD
REVIEWED: 93% (WRATH OF THE LICH KING EXPANSION), JAN '09

131 ACHIEVEMENTS

BEST RPG FALLOUT 3

MORE THAN ANY OTHER role-playing game this year, *Fallout 3* truly embraces its genre thanks to its robust character creation system. And because you stop earning XP and perks at level 20, no one character can be a jack of

all trades, encouraging you to create a wide variety of distinct character types and give them unique experiences. Here are a few of the vastly different personalities that our very own Dan played as:

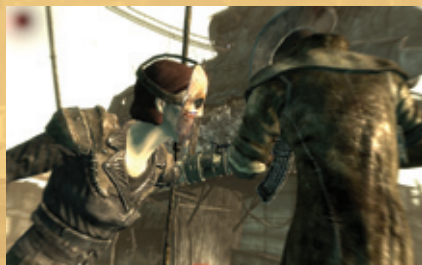


AWARD: BEST RPG
GAME: FALLOUT 3
DEVELOPER: BETHESDA
PUBLISHER: BETHESDA
REVIEWED: 91%, HOLIDAY '08



DUDE

A cliché, charismatic, and intelligent do-gooder, Dude wandered the wastes trying to solve problems with words, not weapons, and was also adept at averting danger by hacking into computer systems to disable security systems and locks. Those who weren't interested in negotiating were incinerated with laser beams to the face (which Dan had tuned to maximum power with his top-of-his-class repair skill).



DAPHNE

A certifiable psychopath, Daphne never missed an opportunity to sneak up and kill something. She preferred to beat people to death with her lightning-fast fists (or to kill them in their sleep with the Sandman perk), but when her arms weren't long enough to reach her victim, she'd huck a grenade or seven. She left a trail of beaten, bloodied, and pillaged bodies all the way from the smoldering crater that was once Megaton to Tenpenny Tower and Rivet City, but her lifelong dream was to kill a mighty Deathclaw with her bare hands.



OBLIVIA

Like Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*, Oblivia was simple-minded but possessed epic strength. She tried to do the right thing, but lacked the brainpower to find non-violent solutions to everyday problems. Sometimes, however, her rapport with children helped her find a way to resolve quests. Her strength allowed her to wield a heavy minigun and slash at enemies with her home-built "shishkebab" flame sword when they got too close. She eventually found her calling hunting down evil-doers and collecting their ears for the Regulators' bounty.

/// Daphne shows her Paralyzing Palm to a Deathclaw. ///



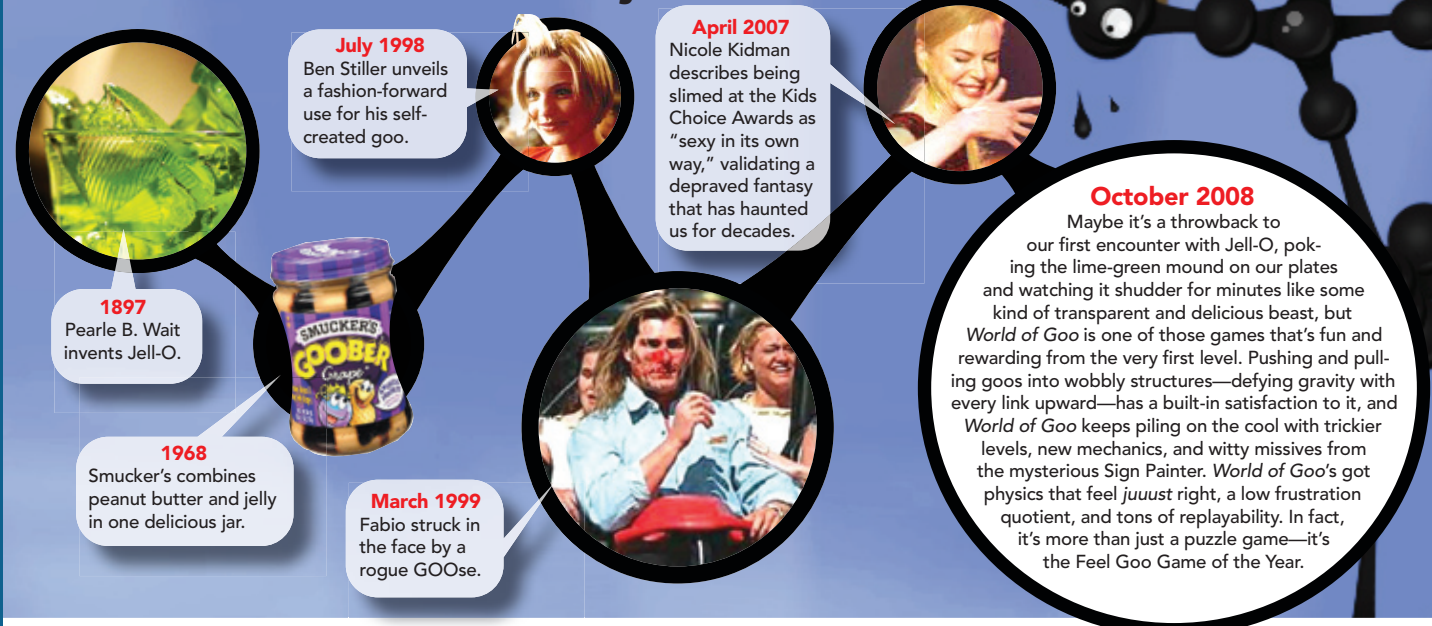
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BEST PUZZLE GAME WORLD OF GOO



AWARD: BEST PUZZLE GAME
GAME: WORLD OF GOO
DEVELOPER: 2D BOY
PUBLISHER: 2D BOY
REVIEWED: 93%, JAN '09

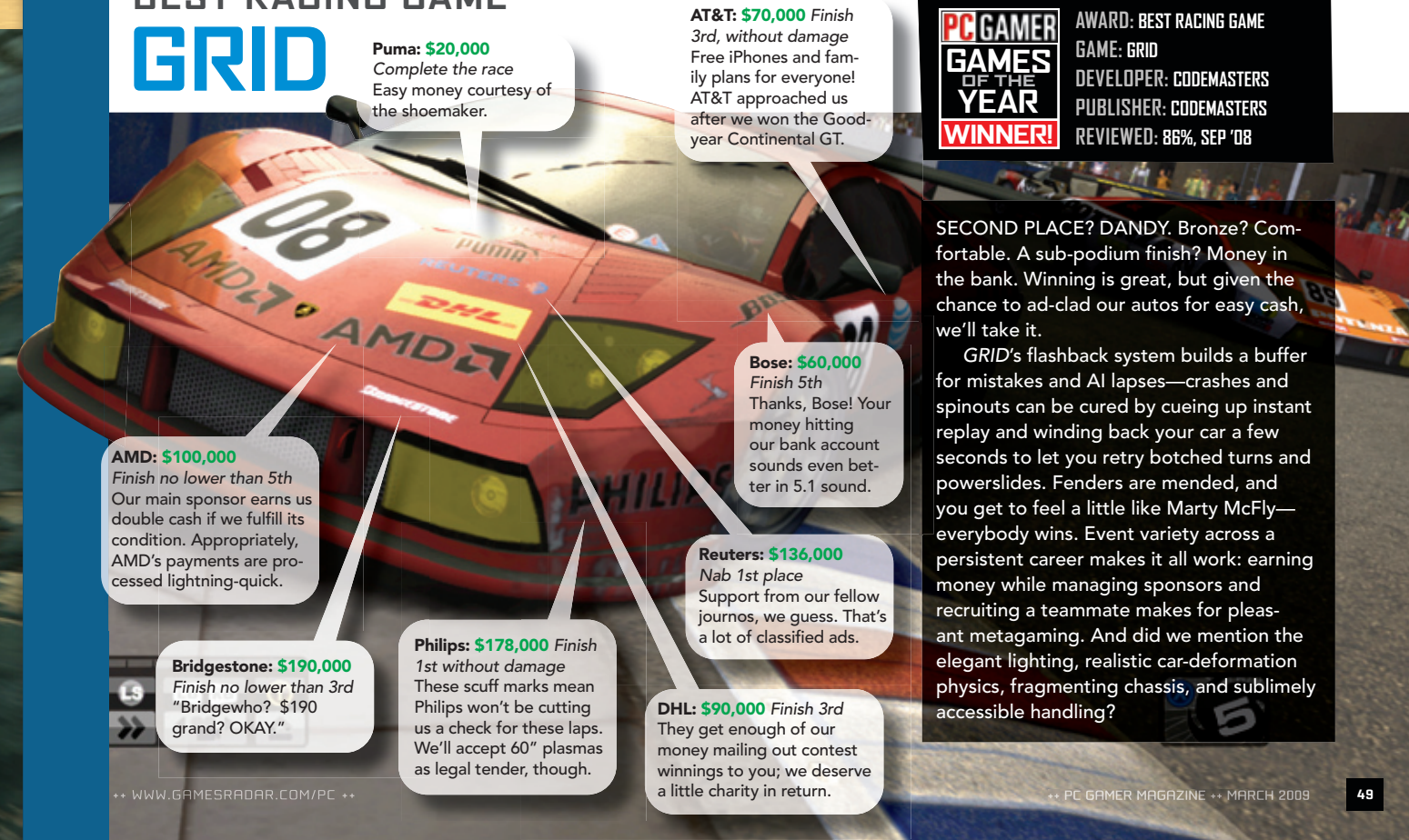
Great Moments in the History of Goo



BEST RACING GAME GRID



AWARD: BEST RACING GAME
GAME: GRID
DEVELOPER: CODEMASTERS
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
REVIEWED: 86%, SEP '08



SECOND PLACE? DANDY. Bronze? Comfortable. A sub-podium finish? Money in the bank. Winning is great, but given the chance to ad-clad our autos for easy cash, we'll take it.

GRID's flashback system builds a buffer for mistakes and AI lapses—crashes and spinouts can be cured by cueing up instant replay and winding back your car a few seconds to let you retry botched turns and powerslides. Fenders are mended, and you get to feel a little like Marty McFly—everybody wins. Event variety across a persistent career makes it all work: earning money while managing sponsors and recruiting a teammate makes for pleasant metagaming. And did we mention the elegant lighting, realistic car-deformation physics, fragmenting chassis, and sublimely accessible handling?

GAMES OF THE YEAR

BEST ADVENTURE

SAM AND MAX: SEASON TWO

WE'D HOPED THAT SOMEDAY, someone would revive the greatest anthropomorphic animal duo since Moose and Squirrel, but never dared to dream that Telltale would bring us not one, but eleven new *Sam and Max* adventures over two ripping seasons chock full of intrigue, danger, and travel to exotic locations from the Bermuda Triangle to outer space and even Hell itself (the latter a notable omission from the *Nancy Drew* series).

Although you can jump cold into any episode of *Sam and Max: Season Two* and have yourself a laugh, it's nothing like starting from the first episode and watching the intricate hydra-headed plot unfold—sort of like *The Bourne Identity*, only with a mean lagomorphs and a dog in a floppy suit. And that the season two finale—*What's New, Beelzebub?*—was one of the funniest episodes in the series yet bodes well for the future. For keeping the spirit of the classic PC adventure game alive, for proving that episodic gaming can be more fun and a better deal for gamers, and for keeping the wit razor-sharp, *Sam and Max: Season Two* gets our nod for best adventure game.



AWARD: BEST ADVENTURE
GAME: SAM AND MAX: SEASON TWO
DEVELOPER: TELLTALE GAMES
PUBLISHER: TELLTALE GAMES
REVIEWED: 90% (WHAT'S NEW,
BEELZEBUB?), JULY '08

BEST OF THE REST

BEST TOY

SPORE

Spore didn't revolutionize the industry like some had hoped it would, but it does offer hours of charming fun-for-fun's-sake that's all too rare in videogames nowadays.

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

ALONE IN THE DARK

Atari blurred the distinction between a game and a human-rights violation with its ambitious but

nonetheless execrable reworking of the *Alone in the Dark* series. But at least it launched a new genre: Survival Snorer.

BEST CHARACTER

WITCH (LEFT 4 DEAD)

We don't know her past or her name, but we do know that she hates flashlights and hits like a truck if you piss her off. Just hearing her lonely wails and knowing she's there is enough to make grown men cry for mama.

BEST LOOT

LAST LAUGH

Raid dungeons give fantastic-looking loot in any MMO, but there's something special about an axe shaped like a flaming demon's skull cackling at your enemies as it separates their head from the body. There's no better way to show friend and foe alike that you've conquered WoW's most difficult raid boss than one of these perfectly named WMDs.



/// Behold, brave raider: the perfect axe to grind. ///



GAMES OF THE YEAR

BEST STRATEGY

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

Most real-time strategy games make you feel like a general leading an army in battle, but precious few imbue you with the awesome power of the supreme leader of an entire empire during a full-scale war. Sure, the *Total War* games let you both command an army and manage a country, but they have to pull you off of the real-time battlefield and into a turn-based game to do the latter; *Sins* does it all in one smoothly zooming, great-looking (but not requirement-heavy) engine, without ever stopping the action. Not only that, but *Sins*' deceptively lethargic pace



AWARD: BEST STRATEGY
GAME: SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE
DEVELOPER: IRONCLAD
PUBLISHER: STARDOCK
REVIEWED: 91%, APRIL '08

allows it to successfully blend mechanics usually reserved for turn-based games—planetary colonization and development, trade routes, culture, and diplomacy—into the real-time gameplay without overwhelming players. It's that seamless

and sense of scope, combined with the innovative and evil anonymous bounty system that lets you sic pirate raiders on other players (even allies), that makes *Sins of a Solar Empire* a unique experience in strategy gaming.

Sins of a Solar Empire wowed us early in the year with its interstellar-scale warfare and epic battles between fleets of hundreds of fighters, frigates, cruisers, and massive capital starships. It still wows us today with its ability to keep us glued to our seats until 4am until we finally conquer that last enemy planet.

BEST OF THE REST

BIGGEST BUZZKILL

DRM

Nothing spoils the excitement of launching a new game like being locked out of it for no good reason. If we could take away awards instead of giving them, this would definitely warrant a 50 DKP minus.

BEST WEAPON

RIPPER (DEAD SPACE)

Construction tool turned carcass-carver, the Ripper launches a

tethered titanium saw blade rotating at 17,000 RPM that cuts up just about any baddy in sight. For slicing those hard-to-reach monsters, the Ripper's secondary mode will launch the blades untethered.

BEST INTERN

JOSH

Certainly best looking! [Ed. note: Josh, awards that you give to yourself don't really count!]



WTF?

NANCY DREW

Seriously, how do Nancy Drew games always make it on the top-10 sales lists?

BEST AMMO

TEDDY BEARS (FALLOUT 3)

Not since Roosevelt has a teddy been this deadly. Eat fluffy button-nosed justice, Super Mutant!



GAMES OF THE YEAR



AWARD: BEST MULTIPLAYER
GAME: LEFT 4 DEAD
DEVELOPER: VALVE
PUBLISHER: VALVE
REVIEWED: 94%, JAN '09

Script Draft -- LEFT 4 DEAD -- "NO MERCY"

Gripping shotguns and SMCs, four survivors emerge from the alley lit by a single flaming barrel. Pausing, they eye the street, and the undead lurk among the shadows.

EVAN
"Okay, we're gonna make a run for it. Safe shop at the end of the street. Norm, toss the pipebomb, let's throw 'n' go."

NORM
"Pipebomb out. Fetch, zombies!"

Norm lobbs the explosive stick down the avenue, and a flicker of urban crannies toward the beeping bomb.

DAN
"Let's go! Run on the right, watch my back."

In the survivors' periphery, the pipebomb blooms zombie as the quartet rounds the corner, a discordant crescendo of zombie hulk gallops into view, knuckle-dragging deformed.

LOGAN
"TANK!"

EVAN
"Son of a witch. Run for it, we can't fight him here."

DAN
"We have to. We'll get separated if we run and a hunter could--"

By now, the tank has moseyed up to one of the vacant cars lining the street. The giant swings, pitching the auto fender-first toward the group. Norm takes the chassis on the chin.

NORM (Incapacitated)
I'm down! Holy s*!t. He punched me with a car. Since when can they punch cars? Why didn't I look both ways?

EVAN
"Hurry-I'll get him up, you guys distract the tank."

DAN
"No, just run!"

LOGAN
"Leave him!"

NORM (Incapacitated, being punched by the tank)
"LEAVE MEEEE!"

The now-trio darts to the pawn shop, sealing the fate of their companion as they shutter the metal door. Even through the sturdy steel, the sound of zombie fist against Norm's skull rings loud.

LOGAN
"...That was awful. Can we have a moment of silence for Norm, guys?"

NORM (Dead)
"Are you kidding? A zombie punched me with a car. Do you have any idea how awesome that is?"

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BEST MULTIPLAYER

LEFT 4 DEAD

More than a tug-of-war, more than a relay race, more than tag-team wrestling—nothing inspires teamwork like a zombie apocalypse. What better context for a buddy movie than one that puts actors in situations where they need to aid, plan, protect one another, and fend off waves of undead peril?

Left 4 Dead's movielike presentation and generous replayability got four fingers up from leading industry critics *PC Gamer*, but its mechanics also make it one of the most inherently social games ever released. If players aren't hashing out how to avoid a witch or shouting out "Smoker on the roof!" over the mic, they're reviving and healing each other, blaming someone for leaving formation, meleeing zombies off of friend's back, and taunting perfectly kind people that they've just vomited on. The amount of watercooler moments we've seen is a credit to *L4D's* unique appeal. In fact, much of the dialogue in the film script is based on actual conversations recorded during *PC Gamer* play sessions.

Our goal at Coconut Monkey Studios is to re-create the subtle techniques that are so innovative in *L4D's* multiplayer. Each round is familiar enough to feel consistent, but never identical: Enemies and weapon drops are generated by an omniscient "director" AI that keeps the tension high, and the hundreds of different dialog bits exchanged between characters is an inventive way of sprinkling story over multiple playthroughs. Versus mode lets gamers plot terrible schemes to pounce, tongue-snare, and grief the hell out of friends. If we can capture this kind of mayhem on the big screen, we're sure to have the biggest hit movie of 2010 on our hands!



Shoreline Court
San Francisco CA

BEST SHOOTER FAR CRY 2

GAMES OF THE YEAR

GRAND THEFT AFRICA, you could call it. Invest a few hours into *Far Cry 2* and it'll open its African arms wide, dishing out all the welcoming charm and elegance it can from its sunny savannah setting—half of which you'll likely burn to the ground. It's an absorbing experience informed by *Half-Life* and *Crysis* alike: You're contained in a first-person perspective from start to finish, and handed an arsenal of deadly instruments to get the job done in whatever manner comes naturally to you. Struggling with jammed guns, navigating an organic landscape, pulling shrapnel out of your skin, and repairing vehicles are nifty nuances that maintain the gameplay's hypnotic pace of oscillating between peaceful exploration and barrel-blowing recklessness. A miles-wide map gives you room to use stealth and snipe, overkill with rockets and flamethrowers, and run down goons with any vehicle you can find. Meanwhile, the abundant scenery is pretty enough to convince us that those long car rides are really virtual safaris. Every day in *Far Cry 2* is different—here's just one casual afternoon tour of the belligerent yet beautiful jungle.

PC GAMER
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PC GAMER
GAMES
OF THE
YEAR
WINNER!

AWARD: BEST SHOOTER
GAME: FAR CRY 2
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
REVIEWED: 94%, HOLIDAY 2008



3:26 p.m. Burned a few acres of savannah, smoked out some APR troops.



4:35 p.m. Rocket-raided a trainyard. Death from above.



6:20 p.m. Shot up a shanty, still no sign of The Jackal.



7:44 p.m. Took a shortcut under the bridge to avoid UFLP patrols. Dart gun coming in handy.



11:23 p.m. Malaria acting up. Shacked up for the night in the nearest safehouse.



10:02 p.m. Delivered some diamonds for APR.



2:51 a.m. Couldn't sleep. Lit some explosives to keep my neighbors up too.



4:38 a.m. Parked the Jeep, watched the sunrise.

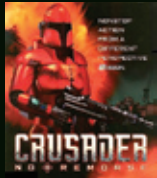


DAN STAPLETON
REVIEWS EDITOR

REVIEWS

CHEERS FOR FALLOUT

As PCG's resident *Fallout* fanboy (the guy who, upon buying an MSI Wind netbook, immediately installed *Fallout 1* and 2 for those long plane rides), it pleases me to no end that *Fallout 3* has claimed our 2008 Game of the Year award. It's a wonderful "I told you so" to the conventional wisdom of the games industry, which claimed that a new *Fallout* game couldn't possibly be a real hit because the 1990s games didn't sell through the roof, and delayed the franchise's return for years. (I'm not counting *Tactics*.) Maybe next time they'll listen to my mad yet apparently prophetic ramblings!



/// Why not a new *Crusader* game? That guy was a badass. ///

Perhaps the most important thing about *Fallout 3*'s success (both critical and commercial) is what it means for fanboys of all the other classic games out there that haven't yet made their dramatic return: It is now indisputable that the celebrated game franchises of yesteryear, abandoned by publishers as only marginally good sellers, can still be great and more successful than ever today if treated with the proper respect. Bring back *X-COM*, *X-Wing*, *Crusader*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Wing Commander*, *Ultima*, *Syndicate*, *MechWarrior*, and <insert your favorite classic-but-inactive game franchise here>! There are dozens of excellent development teams out there who are passionate fans of all these games and their universes, just like Bethesda is about *Fallout*, and would love nothing more than to work their hearts out to make high-quality 21st century versions. I'm not one to cheer on sequelitis or poo-poo innovation, but as Todd Howard pointed out on page 42, great ideas never die.

GRAND THEFT AUTO IV PERFORMANCE TIPS

■ ARE YOUR EXPLOITS IN LIBERTY CITY CHUGGING? WE CAN HELP!

While we were some of the lucky ones for whom *Grand Theft Auto IV* ran respectably well, its release was met with an outcry from the community over poor performance, even on high-end hardware. Even after patching, many of these problems persist. So for all of you out there waiting to play Rockstar's open-world crime masterpiece at an acceptable speed, try these *PC Gamer*-certified tips and tweaks:



1

Reduce draw distance to zero, then viciously beat rival gang members to death with your red-tipped white cane.



3

In addition to Games for Windows Live, Rockstar Social Club, and possibly Steam, create an account for and log into the Rockstar Make Your Game Run Reasonably Well Club online service.

4

Lower your expectations. Max out *Crysis* and play until 12 frames per second looks silky smooth by comparison.



5

Do shots of hard liquor until your brain slows down to the point where your mind is only processing at that speed anyway.

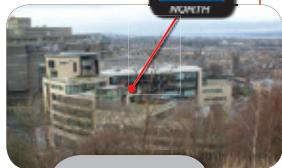
6

Go to Rockstar's offices and play on their computers—they say it runs fine for them.



2

Reconfigure your hardware. Move superfluous components like your quad-core CPU, four gigabytes of RAM, 10,000 RPM hard disk, and Radeon 4870 X2 videocard out of the way. Now there's enough room to fit an Xbox 360 inside!



HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

90%

EDITORS' CHOICE

100%-90%

It's not easy to get here, and games in this range come with our unqualified recommendation.

80%

EXCELLENT

89%-80%

These are excellent games. They're well worth buying, and each one is likely a great example of its genre.

70%

GOOD

79%-70%

These are pretty good games that we'd recommend to fans of the particular genre, but better options exist.

60%

ABOVE AVERAGE

69%-60%

Reasonable, above-average games. They might be worth buying, but they probably have a few significant flaws.

50%

MERELY OKAY

59%-50%

Very ordinary games. They're not completely worthless, but you can definitely find numerous better choices.

40%

TOLERABLE

49%-40%

Poor quality. Only a few slightly redeeming features keep these games from the abyss of the next category.

30%

DON'T BOTHER

39%-0%

Just terrible. These games are the electronic equivalent of being smothered by a thousand furious furballs.



WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II

THE STRATEGY SERIES REDEFINES ITSELF AS A GORGEOUS AND GORY ACTION RPG

Two words that aren't often associated with real-time strategy games: instant gratification. Yet *Dawn of War II* manages to turn the RTS formula on its ear, putting you in the thick of battle almost 100 percent of the time and ensuring that your moment-to-moment decisions involve picking which alien ass to kick

with your giant red armored boot.

It isn't dumbed down at all, but the focus has shifted to tactical combat. Indeed, *Dawn of War II* has gone to such lengths to differentiate itself from *that other* real-time strategy game with space marines fighting aliens that it's become something else entirely. The transformation goes something like this: take an RTS, add role-playing mechanics like hero unit-leveling, tons of special abilities, and loot, then strip away RTS mechanics like



base-building, resource management, and expendable units. The result is a party-based action-RPG with RTS-style controls and camera. Or, like I just said, instant gratification.

IT'S A DRASTIC DEPARTURE, but this formula pays off by dramatically upping the action dosage from your typical RTS—rather than spending half of your time managing unit production and upgrading your troops, you're in constant combat. Outfitting and upgrading your squads and deciding which missions to take on is handled between missions from the safety of your orbiting battle-

ship in the somewhat shallow meta-game, so all you have to keep track of in battle is the health of your soldiers (they never die, they just become incapacitated until revived).

That can be harder than it sounds, because the armor system is difficult to fully comprehend, so when your troops do

go down it can take you by surprise.

Everything works brilliantly until your sixth or seventh mission. That's when the realization dawns on you that most missions are extremely repetitious, dragging down enthusiasm as the 20-plus-hour campaign progresses. Two mission types, each taking between five and fifteen minutes to complete, make up the lion's share of the game: assaults, in which you fight your way to the opposite corner of the map (optionally detouring to capture factories and shrines to boost to your ship-based support powers), finishing with a super-powerful boss unit; and defense missions where you must protect power generators against increasingly potent waves of attackers. Only a few of the story missions deviate from these patterns, and there aren't nearly enough of them to break the monotony. Aggravating this, there are only a handful of maps (three or four per planet) and you burn through missions at a rapid-fire speed, so you'll probably find yourself constantly muttering, "This map *again*? Really?" At least the maps are designed to have multiple paths, so you don't *have* to play it the same way every time. Much ado has been made over the cover system; if you set up a gunner squad behind rocks or walls, they take much less damage than they would out in the open. In practice, cover is only really helpful against basic

TEXTBOOK ASSAULT



1 With the Devastators and Dreadnought in position, the Assault Marines jump over the wall to roil the Tyranids into disarray.



2 The Dreadnought bursts through the wall, flamethrower blazing, clearing the way for the Devastators to open fire.



3 The Force Commander teleports in to help clean up, and the squad earns a piece of Wargear for their trouble.



Wargear beefs up your squad's weapons, armor, and abilities. Equipping a rare (blue) item like this glowing axe makes a big difference in stats.

VITALS: GENRE: ACTION RPG/REAL-TIME STRATEGY DEVELOPER: RELIC PUBLISHER: THQ REQUIRED: P4 3.2GHZ, 1GB RAM (1.5GB VISTA), 128MB GEFORCE 6600GT/RADEON X1600, 5.5GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 MAX PLAYERS: 6 ESRB: M DRM: MUST INSTALL AND RUN STEAM CLIENT

SIX SQUADS OF BLOOD RAVEN

CYRUS THE SCOUT



Cyrus is difficult to keep alive, but if you can manage it he has some deadly abilities like snipe, which can be devastating against Tyranids. He's also adept at stealth.

THE FORCE COMMANDER



I call mine Mr. Sparkles. He can wield guns, but his durability and speed make him indispensable as a melee fighter. He can also be equipped with special Force Commander upgrades like a battle standard that buffs nearby squads, an assault marine jump-jet pack, or a teleporter (my favorite) that whisks him into or out of danger in the blink of an eye.

TARKUS THE TACTICAL MARINE



Tarkus is your basic frontline infantryman. He's no one-trick pony, though—he can carry a ton of special items, making him useful in nearly any situation.

AVITUS THE DEVASTATOR



Avitus needs a moment to set up his heavy bolter gun or rocket launcher before he can fire, but when he does he'll unleash hell. Level him up enough and he'll earn a trait that removes the need for the setup time.

DAVIAN THULE THE DREADNOUGHT



A massive walking tank, the Dreadnought lays waste to everything in its path. Depending on what equipment you find, Thule can be lethal at long or short range, and unstoppable to light infantry.

THADDEUS ASSAULT MARINE



Jump-jet marines are probably the most fun to use in the entire game. Target the center of a group of enemies and Thaddeus's squad will crash down on them with a fury, knocking down anything they don't kill outright, and then go to town melee style.



/// The three worlds have distinct environments, all of which look as good as this one does. ///

the unstoppable horde of aliens is coming!" plot that will surprise no one, but it's a more than serviceable excuse to gun down and cut to gory pieces thousands of aliens.

Also unsurprising (but in this case, pleasantly so) are the amazing visuals. *DoWII* is easily the best-looking RTS or action RPG of the past year. Every unit is up to Relic's incredibly high standard of detail and animation; weapon effects are shock-and-awe-inspiring (I'm partial to the Dreadnought's sweeping Hail of Fury barrage); and the maps on each planet have their own distinct look and feel. Killing-blow animations are standouts, too—watching larger units like the Dreadnought or Eldar Wraith Lord walker pick up an infantryman and rip him to shreds makes you want to zoom in and gawk at the macabre performance.

The controls are also cribbed from action RPGs, and work great once you get the hang of things. Ability hotkeys are clustered around the Q, W, and E keys, right next to the

infantry, since nearly every other type of unit has an ability to defeat entrenched units (grenades, jumpjets, teleporters, flamethrowers, rocket launchers, melee charges, etc). Since the majority of the mid- and late-game missions pit you against the melee-focused Tyranids, the importance of cover is diminished. It's too bad, because when it's useful

the cover-based combat is some of the most tactically interesting gameplay in *DoWII*.

THE CAMPAIGN'S STORY follows the Blood Ravens, an elite squad of Space Marines defending the three planets of sub-sector Aurelia from invasion by the Orks, Eldar, and Tyranids. It's your standard "Oh no,



This Force Commander rocks a flamethrower—a perfect weapon for suppressing Tyranids while Thaddeus' squad cuts them up.

The green dots show how many members of each squad are still standing. Retreating a squad back to a captured building reinforces it back to full strength quickly.

Wargear drops when you kill a random lucky alien. This Tactical Relocator can be equipped by the Force Commander, letting him annoy the hell out of his enemies with teleportation powers.

On defense missions you can call down turrets, land mines, and artillery barrages from your battleship. The more factories you hold, the more equipment you get.



MULTIPLAYER BRINGS THE MUCH-NEEDED VARIETY THAT SINGLE-PLAYER LACKS, SINCE YOU CAN PLAY AS ANY OF THE FOUR FACTIONS AND CHOOSE FROM THREE COMMANDER TYPES.

1 through 4 keys used to select squads.

As your squads earn experience from this visceral combat and level up, you can specialize them in areas like ranged combat or durability, unlocking new abilities—many of which, like Thaddeus's Merciless Strike, are a blast to use. Further customization depends on what loot—called Wargear—you earn through mission rewards and randomized drops. Finding new and rare Wargear keeps things fresh amid the repetition—when you equip your squad with a flaming power sword, you see them carrying it around and chopping up enemies with nifty new animations as well as increased damage.

However, the fact that you can take only

four of the six squads on any given mission means that, unless you're rotating frequently, two are going to level up much more slowly than their peers. It's the Space Marine equivalent of getting held back a grade—and those kids always get picked last in kickball.

MULTIPLAYER IS A DIFFERENT story—since all of the units have been rebalanced, it's essentially a different game. There's still virtually no base-building, and resource gathering is simplified to capturing and holding map points. Victory is achieved by holding strategic points rather than destroying the enemy's base (a mode familiar to anyone who's played *DoW I* or *Company of Heroes*), which allows for some very impressive last-minute comebacks as desperate underdogs retake territory. The cover system is much more useful here, too, since more basic infantry is in play.

Multiplayer also brings the much-needed variety that single-player lacks, since you can play as any of the four factions and choose from three commander types to suit your play style. But you'll have to spend some time in skirmish mode to familiarize yourself with the basic mechanics of the

Orks, Eldar, and Tyranids, since there are no tutorial missions. Also, since there's no carryover from the single-player campaign, you can't use your buffed up squads here (which would be horribly unbalanced, but fun), and loot is replaced by a purchased upgrade system. Instead, your customization is done in the army painter, where you can create a hot-pink platoon of Tyranids to take into battle.

Dramatically different single and multiplayer modes make *Dawn of War II* a difficult game to slap a single label on, but I can say this: Relic's bold new take on the series proves itself worthy of the name with instant, intense tactical action—and despite the déjà vu campaign missions, the overall experience is thoroughly engrossing.

/// DAN STAPLETON ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Great graphics and animations; fast-paced tactical gameplay; co-op campaign mode; excellent RTS multiplayer mode.

LOWS// Repetitive missions; no tutorials for Eldar, Orks, or Tyranids; certain game elements aren't explained well.

BOTTOM LINE// Although it severely lacks in mission variety, *Dawn of War II* skips the pleasures of base-building and gets right to the point: action-packed, bloody warfare (with loot!).

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**
** EXCELLENT **

CO-COMMANDERS

At any time in the campaign you can use the Games for Windows Live interface (which works surprisingly smoothly) to invite a friend to control half of your four squads, letting each of you focus on intensely micro-managing the two squads under your control and coordinate to pull off combination attacks you couldn't do yourself in real time.



There's a thin metal pipe running along the ceiling with signs hanging from it. Jump toward it and Faith will grab on, letting you build momentum by swinging back and forth before launching between platforms.

Like any time you go on vacation somewhere known for its beautiful architecture, *Mirror's Edge's* city is covered in scaffolding. It's all climbable and gives you access to alternate routes.

The police—or "Blues," get it?—are best avoided. This is one of the SWAT team enemies, who carry shotguns, assault rifles, and are padded with armor.

Small objects like boxes and furniture often act as a stepping stone, letting you run and leap onto a higher surface. Here it's a chair that lets you take the high road and rise above the enemies ahead.

MIRROR'S EDGE

■ A HOP, SKIP, AND A JUMP AWAY FROM GREATNESS

The early levels of *Mirror's Edge* are the ones that best communicate the joys of the game, as they're the ones that best deliver the free-running dream. That is: you, in an urban environment, gracefully inventing your own path from point Here to point Over There. You hop over fences, slide under

pipes, run along walls, rebound off buildings and vault from ledges—all of it from a first-person perspective and (ideally) without breaking stride. It's smooth, fast, and exhilarating, but its creators took one chance too few to make it brilliant.

Your character is Faith, a Runner. Runners are acrobatic postmen, travelling via rooftops to illegally deliver messages the sender doesn't want intercepted by the spying government regime. Faith's sister is on the other side, a police officer who's framed for murder, prompting Faith to investigate. Cue lots of running. Faith is likeable—a rare humble protagonist who's willing to express something other than detached sarcasm—but the real star is the unnamed city; it's the playground you'll be bounding across, its insides a mixture of primary colors and modernist furniture, its outsides sparkling like a Christmas tree ornament.

You're assisted in finding your path by Runner Vision, which highlights certain items of scenery in red—things like a rope-line that can be slid down, a pipe that can be climbed. It makes snap decision-making easier, but the levels still encourage a thoughtful mode of play. You want to stop, look around, work out how to get up there, and then implement your solution.

INSTEAD, THE GAME BECOMES infested by cops and snipers and SWAT teams and helicopters. As the environments become more complicated, the red objects also become less overt. You want to stop more to plan, but the enemies never let you. Each chapter, you bound to the top of a building and the cops—or "Blues"—burst in, and you either have to run past them or go through them.

Going through them means punching and kicking them to the ground, or



/// I feel a "Remember kids, don't try this at home, I'm a professional" moment coming on. ///

performing a disarm move. Disarming is essentially a quick-time event, accomplished by hitting the right-mouse button when their weapon turns red mid-attack, helpfully played in slow-motion. It's satisfying to watch your leg appear from the bottom of the screen and slam your opponent's head in to the ground, then use your newly acquired gun to dispatch the other enemies.

It's clear that the developers don't want this to be a traditional shooter; there's no way to reload your gun, and carrying it slows you down. Yet although it's pos-



/// SWAT teams travel in packs, so it's usually much easier to avoid them than fight. ///

sible to complete the game without firing a single shot, for pure reasons of convenience you'll likely turn to aggressive solutions before too long. I'm not saying anything bad about the combat, other than that it hinders rather than enhances the core pleasure of the game.

It's precisely because the rendering of free running is sublime that its constant, violent interruption is so frustrating. The world feels physically solid in a way other games don't. Walk close to a surface and your hands will raise and press against it. Fall slightly short on a jump and your arms will launch out and scrabble at the surface to pull you up. There's an attention to detail here that places you firmly within this beautiful city, and it gives you the means to perform stunning acrobatic feats.

THE PC IS DEFINITELY the ideal platform for *Mirror's Edge*, since it's easier to make jumps using a mouse and keyboard and (if you're using a PhysX-compatible Nvidia card) fist-smashing through glass is even more satisfying. Even so, when attempting one moment of crane-leaping, I fell to my death half a dozen times—and there's no quicksave. This proved occasionally frustrating, particularly when a death happened after a scripted ambush I was then forced to walk into a dozen times, but most checkpoints are well-placed.

The story mode is short—I completed it in around six hours. While that will annoy a lot of gamers, I must say that I appreciated it for



/// "I'll make you a deal: I'll trade you your fancy sniper rifle for my foot in your face." ///

not padding the experience needlessly. Despite the lack of multiplayer, there are two other modes that extend the life of the game. Speed Run is the story mode levels with an added timer. Time Trial, meanwhile, is set in specific areas of those same levels and is entirely devoid of enemies.

No enemies at all! The Time Trial mode removes *Mirror's Edge's* one major irritation, turning it into a game purely about movement and iteratively improving your performance. There's an argument to be made for this mode being *Mirror's Edge*

distilled into its pure form.

Mirror's Edge is ambitious and successful in both making a platformer from a first-person perspective and in its implementation of free running. But it's stymied by its attempts to combine those new ideas with the traditional first-person shooter model. It's as if someone told them that people were scared of new things and that they should instead take something familiar and put a clock in it instead. In other words, it's really, really good and you should play it, but damn, it could have been superb. /// GRAHAM SMITH ///



/// It may look daunting, but there is some awfully conveniently placed stuff in your path. ///



/// Indoor areas are constrained, but also more interesting. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Gorgeous city; novel free-running gameplay; interesting characters; Time Trial mode.

LOWS// Short story mode; annoying enemies; no quicksave.

BOTTOM LINE// *Mirror's Edge* is a marvelous idea with a lot of satisfying moments. It's best experienced in Time Trial mode to avoid being hassled as you leap from rooftop to rooftop.

0% BETTER >> 100% **83%**
** EXCELLENT **

■ VITALS ■ GENRE: ACTION DEVELOPER: EA DICE PUBLISHER: EA REQUIRED: P4 3GHZ, 1GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 6/RADON X1300 PRO VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT VIDEOCARD (FOR PHYSX) MAX PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: T DRM: ONLINE ACTIVATION REQUIRED; 5 INSTALLS; NON-REVOCABLE



SAINTS ROW 2

A GANG-WARFARE VARIETY SHOW MAKES ITS NOT-SO-SMOOTH PC DEBUT

From the setting to the gameplay, *Saints Row 2* borrows quite a bit from *Grand Theft Auto*—but it's not “just another” clone. In fact, on the Xbox, the *Saints Row* series is probably the best-received of the many open-world carjacking crime-spree games attempting to copy *GTA*'s successful

formula, and *Saints Row 2* maintains that reputation with its fast action and goofy humor. Too bad its rough-around-the-edges quality—thanks in part to a slipshod console port—make it a distant second place.

The game begins with a bang when your character awakens from a two-year coma and immediately sets off to re-establish the Saints gang as the city's dominant criminal organization, fighting three rival gangs and a corporate sleazebag. PC-only gamers might feel a bit out of sorts at first, since the original *Saints Row* never made it to the PC, and some plot threads and returning charac-

ters pick up right where the first game left off. The plot isn't very complex, though, so there's no problem figuring out who you should point your gun at.

Right from the start, *SR2* lets you get creative with the comical character customization options. You can go for the standard gangster look, or perhaps you could try an obese cross-dressing clown. Me? I made Mr. Spock—which added some genuinely hilarious moments to the in-engine cutscenes. You can also customize your gang members' looks as pimps, bodyguards, or ninjas (among others). However, the city itself has less character, and while the stylized art style does its best to cover up the lack of detail, it does so with limited success.

YOU'D THINK THAT the benefit of less-than-cutting-edge graph-

Star Trek's Michael Dorn voices Maero, leader of the Brotherhood gang.



In the Fuzz side missions, you dress up as a cop and misbehave for a TV show's cameras.

ics would be a smooth frame rate, but in this case you'd be wrong. I couldn't get the game to reliably run at more than 15 to 20 frames per second while driving around the city on high-end hardware, and bizarrely, it wasn't significantly better even when set to low detail at 800x600 resolution. Even on high settings cars don't look great, and AI-controlled vehicles frequently vanish even while you're looking directly at them.

VITALS GENRE: THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER DEVELOPER: VOLITION PUBLISHER: THQ REQUIRED: P4 2GHZ, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 7600/RADEON X1300 VIDEOCARD, 15GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION RECOMMENDED: 3.2GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 3850 MAX PLAYERS: 12 ESRB: M DRM: MUST INSTALL AND RUN STEAM CLIENT



This guy's name is Johnny Gat, and he likes to kill people. Apparently we're BFFs from the first game.



Headshots are the one thing you'll want a mouse for—everything else is gamepad-friendly.



The character editor lets you play as anybody, even a badass Rastafarian Mr. Spock.

It also doesn't support common widescreen resolutions like 1680x1050 or 1920x1080. The next most-noticeable port issue is the lack of mouse controls for the menus—not an issue if you plug in a gamepad, but in a game with this much free-aim shooting that's hard to recommend.

But while it may not look like a million bucks, there are a million and one things to do. Minigames range from causing as much destruction as you can to escorting prostitutes and drug dealers to fight-club

brawls to spraying sewage on everything in sight. A few are frustrating (including anything involving those out-of-control helicopters), most are good fun, and a handful are downright addictive—like Insurance Fraud, in which you must throw yourself in front of oncoming traffic. The game makes certain that you seek out the side missions by requiring you to fill a “respect meter” by completing them before you can take a story mission.

Once you dig into those story missions, you're in for a jarring juxtaposition. The main story, despite all its quippy dialogue, deals with brutal gang warfare and dramatic killings of sympathetic characters. (It's the best way to inspire vengeful rampages.) This clashes a bit with the goofiness of the side missions and the character customization, adding bipolar disorder to the game's sociopathic issues. The B-actor-studded voice cast does an excellent job, though.

Both story and side missions involve a lot of vehicular combat, ramming other cars and firing out of windows at suicidal speeds. This is the best action of the game (combat

IT MAY NOT LOOK LIKE A MILLION BUCKS, BUT THERE ARE A MILLION AND ONE THINGS TO DO. MINIGAMES RANGE FROM CAUSING AS MUCH DESTRUCTION AS POSSIBLE TO SPRAYING SEWAGE.

on foot is nothing special, except for the ability to use people as human shields) and yields some awesome moments—firing behind

you and successfully sniping the driver of a pursuing car, or the less-subtle approach of blowing the whole thing to hell, never gets old. Driving is very forgiving, with nothing even resembling Newtonian physics getting in the way of your crazy stunts, jumps, and high-speed head-on collisions.

THE ZANNINESS OF THE side missions carries over into multiplayer, with a grab-bag mode that quickly rotates through team-based competitive modes, including an armed race, picking up prostitutes and escorting them to johns, and the obvious demolition derby. The problem with the multiplayer is that the shooting action fails to stand out from the crowd in any way, and the driving is marred by concessions like instantly popping in and out of cars with no animations, making it feel unpolished. The co-op option is more compelling, though the game doesn't adjust difficulty or the story at all to accommodate the second player—he's just kind of there.

Saints Row 2 doesn't offer up a particularly compelling world or story, making it short on memorable moments, but while you're playing, it does go out of its way to make sure you're never bored by means of sheer quantity of action and variety of gameplay. However, because of technical issues with the port and a lack of enhancements to take advantage of the PC's hardware, the PC version isn't *Saints Row 2* at its best. **DAN STAPLETON**

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS Goofy side missions; creative character customization; engaging story missions; co-op play.

LOWS Poor performance; city lacks detail; no mouse support in menus; unpolished multiplayer.

BOTTOM LINE Though not particularly memorable, *Saints Row 2*'s huge volume of quests and goofy side missions make it one of the better open-world crime games available, but the PC port's technical scars drag it down.

0% BETTER >> 100% **75%**
++ GOOD ++



Many of those useless old skills have a new reason to exist, but not bards. Bards are stupid. Because they're bards.

These bandits are a random encounter. Often they're best avoided, since you can't just heal up whenever you like.

The monk's infamous Butt Pat ability—50 percent chance of boosting party morale or casting Bigby's Restraining Order.

You get four custom characters, with familiars and recruitable NPCs to fill the ranks. None have much personality this time 'round.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2: STORM OF ZEHIR

MONEY MAKES THE WORLD GO ONE MORE ROUND

Love it or hate it, you've got to give *Storm of Zehir* points for effort. Obsidian could easily have banged out a generic adventure for this expansion, but instead, it's produced a radical overhaul that's not afraid to take a few

risks, such as turning the traditional *Dungeons and Dragons* RPG into a fantasy trading and empire-building game.

The classic linear single-player campaign is now complemented with a more open world, and several major new features. For example, *Neverwinter* always let you control multiple characters, but in *Zehir* you create a four-person party from the outset, with a creation system that really requires you to know your stuff when it comes to *D&D* rules. You can have the computer do this for you, but it can't match a *D&D* expert's know-how.

You start the game unarmed and under siege by a small army of monsters, and it's quite prepared to kill your newbie ass right there and then. Death is no longer the minor setback it once was; if nobody's left standing to limp back to the nearest temple after a fight, consider your game well and truly over. Thank goodness for the auto-save option...

The new overworld mode kicks in when you leave town, zooming the camera back

to show the surrounding area. From this view you can avoid pointless fights with wandering monsters and track down bonus goodies scattered 'round the map. Getting into a fight with these monsters is tedious, especially since you've got to sit through a loading screen and sort out buffs for everyone each time, so you're better off focusing on the quest locations.

TOWNS ARE THE FINAL new feature, but most are little more than a menu that lets you rest at the tavern, heal your group at the Temple, and most importantly (by far), trade. Very early on you're roped into joining a trading company, and much of the game is built around creating your own little empire. It's not a bad idea, but it's hardly high strategy, and definitely not high adventure.

That's the basic flaw of the whole package—it winds up feeling too flabby for a regular story and too claustrophobic to let you really ride off in search of your own



/// The more money you make, the wealthier everyone becomes. Hooray for capitalism! ///

adventure. Look at the campaign as a demo and foundation for these features, because many of these are likely to drip-feed into future downloadable modules. It's not a bad campaign by any means, simply an odd choice for a major expansion.

/// RICHARD COBBETT ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Ambitious new features; open-world gameplay; overworld map view.

LOWS// Not newbie-friendly; harsh death penalty; story doesn't fit well into an open world.

BOTTOM LINE// *Storm of Zehir* swaps adventuring for building a trade empire. It's nice to see the franchise trying new things, but not all of them are fully baked yet.

0% BETTER >> 100%

71%

GOOD

VITALS GENRE: ROLE-PLAYING GAME DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN PUBLISHER: ATARI REQUIRED: P4 2.4GHZ, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X700 VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE, NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2 RECOMMENDED: P4 2.6GHZ, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON X1950 MAX PLAYERS: 4 ESRB: T



/// My water droplet possesses a strawberry to safely cross the absorbent pancake. ///

I-FLUID

A LITTLE DRIP IN A BIG WORLD

Physics! It's the cry of the masses...or at least of Logan, masses of times. Its availability to smaller independent developers has led to classics such as *World of Goo* and *Crayon Physics Deluxe*. *I-Fluid* isn't about to join these prestigious titles, but it's hard to deny it's a sweet idea.

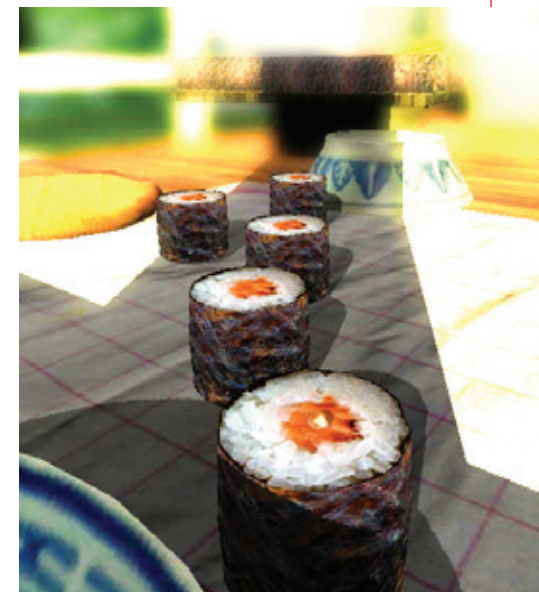


/// Little did you know, your pigsty of a desk is actually a physics-based puzzle. ///

You play as a teeny gravity-defying drip of water that rolls around domestic surfaces attempting to avoid anything absorbent. You have peculiar tasks to perform, such as making a Mexican hat swing, or getting a tomato into a fondue pan, using the droplet's various abilities. It can jump, and later double-jump, as well as climb the sides of certain surfaces, and even "possess" food items. This means you'll find yourself rolling a tomato over a stove top, shortly after which you'll begin to wonder what's become of the world.

Unfortunately, the cute physics puzzles and almost photo-realistic graphics are let down by some shoddy design. The instructions for how to play are available within the first level, but to start playing you have to already know them just to navigate your way across the game's hub area (pipes lead

VITALS GENRE: PUZZLE DEVELOPER: EXKEE PUBLISHER: EXKEE/STEAM REQUIRED: P4 1GHZ, 512MB RAM, GEFORCE 4 TI4600/RADEON 9700, 370MB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: RUNS GREAT ON REQUIREMENTS MAXIMUM PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: N/A



/// Here I'm playing as a drop of mercury bouncing around on Jeremy Piven's lunch. ///

to each level). Madness. Then, despite the controls telling you it's the left mouse button to jump, you can't, and it doesn't say why. A couple of levels later it adds this ability, but not before you've concluded your mouse must be broken. Even the zoom won't work until the game's told you about it a second time.

MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, THE level goals are poorly defined. As the tasks become more complex, they begin to border on the mystifying. One in particular asks you to get a sea urchin to reach a bar and knock over some sushi. However, the bar is impossible to see, and the sushi pile invisible. Eventually you realize you need to fling yourself blindly across the room using a floppy fish (obviously).

There are various ways to play each level, and when you know what you're meant to be doing, it's fun to figure out a route. With more clarity and smarter instructions, this would feel a lot more professional and be easier to recommend. At \$10, it's probably still worth a look.

/// JOHN WALKER ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Extremely clever idea; photo-realistic graphics; multiple solutions to puzzles.

LOWS// Some puzzles are poorly designed; goals are often unclear.

BOTTOM LINE// *I-Fluid* is a very promising independent game that just needed a little more clarity in its instructions and level design to be a fantastic puzzler.

0% BETTER >> 100%

70%

GOOD



HERCULES
BY THE LOOKS OF IT, PELIAS HAS AN ARMY HERE.

/// Jason's ship, the Argo, serves as a mobile HQ for the Argonauts. As you recruit more Argonauts, they'll loiter around the deck waiting to be taken on a mission. ///

RISE OF THE ARGONAUTS

■ MORE EXCITING THAN ANCIENT HISTORY CLASS, BUT JUST AS MUCH TALKING

Jason's Argonauts are the ancient Greek equivalent of the Justice League: the most powerful heroes of the time, such as Hercules and Medea, join forces to fight the ancient world's most dangerous monsters. Based only loosely on the mythology, *Rise of the Argonauts* is set in a beautifully styled,

Hollywood-esque version of ancient Greece that seems tailor-made for mythical superheroes.

Where other action role-playing games use repetitive dungeon crawling to separate epic battles, *RotA* relies heavily on social quests and moral dilemmas, such as whether to help or punish an orphan who's resorted to crime. These social quests are worthwhile, as they engage you with the game's strong story, and are often considered "deeds" that can be dedicated to one of four gods to im-

prove your character in the RPG ability tree. However, the large amount of runner quests should have warranted a minimap, even considering the extremely linear levels.

FIGHTS ARE TOO FEW and far between, especially early on, but when you are allowed to let your sword do the talking, each armed conflict is a well-developed scenario meaningful to the story. Boss fights are epic struggles that encourage you to naturally develop strategy in response to changing threats, and the game's hyperactive autosave ensures you never lose progress to experimentation.

The combat UI is brilliantly minimalistic, conveying damage to enemies with broken shields and bloody wounds on the models instead of obtrusive health bars or icons. Combat itself is liberatingly freeform. You are never locked onto a single enemy; instead, you choose targets based on direction. This mobility, combined with freely swapping

between your mace, sword, and spear (each with different special abilities) and choosing which of your unique companions to bring along, allows you to get creative.

The Achilles' heel of *RotA* is its less-than-divine origins as a console port. Textures and overly abundant cutscenes are grainy at PC resolutions, and turning the camera often causes minor choppiness, even on high-end systems. The clumsy camera can be downright frustrating when it circles your character in the heat of battle so that holding a side strafe button moves you in a circle—right into the attack you were trying to avoid. (I also had to use alt-enter to force the game into full-screen mode.)

Rise of the Argonauts provides a wonderful story-driven experience, but its technical flaws and over-reliance on social quests put a damper on the rich narrative and exceptional (but infrequent) combat.

/// JOSH AUGUSTINE ///



/// The finishing moves slow everything down to make sure you see gory detail. If only there were more enemies to bisect. ///

■ **VITALS** ■ GENRE: ACTION ROLE-PLAYING DEVELOPER: LIQUID PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS REQUIRED: P4 2.4GHZ, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6/ATI RADEON X1300 VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE RECOMMENDED: DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD MAXIMUM PLAYERS: 1 ESRB: M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Empowering combat; unintrusive UI; epic story-telling in an appealing universe.

LOWS// Frustrating camera; poor performance; low-res cutscenes; infrequent combat.

BOTTOM LINE// *Rise of the Argonauts* isn't just another brainless hack-n-slash ARPG, but unfortunately it is just another half-assed console port.

0% BETTER >> 100% **67%**

■ ABOVE AVERAGE ■

EXTENDED PLAY

HOW TO MAKE A COMIC IN GARRY'S MOD

■ BECAUSE DRAWING IS, LIKE, REALLY HARD

DIFFICULTY

Skill: Medium

Time: Two hours

PROGRAMS

- Garry's Mod - It lets you manipulate physics objects in the Source engine, available on Steam for \$10
- A Source engine game - a copy of *Counter-Strike* or *TF2* will do
- An image editing program

RESOURCE HARVESTER

The G-Mod community is bursting with ideas, custom creations, and profanity. forums.facepunchstudios.com



01 THE ALMIGHTY MOD

So you've got an idea for a gaming comic, but can't draw to save your life? Don't fret! Garry's Mod lets you play Picasso inside familiar Source engine games, letting you bend and pose your favorite game characters, give them facial expressions, utilize effects like explosions and gunfire, and drop stage props and objects into your scenes. Snap a few screenshots of your in-game comedy, pull them into an image editing program like Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro or Gimp (free from www.gimp.org), and you'll be ready to share your creation with the interwebs.



02 SPAWN OF THE DEAD

Start a single-player game of Garry's Mod, then choose your map from the list that displays Source engine levels as well as some created expressly for Garry's Mod. "gm_construct" is a good map to begin on. Once the level loads, hold down (not toggle) the Q key to bring up your menu, which you can use to access tools and prop lists. Start by choosing a character—*Half-Life 2*'s notorious Dr. Breen, for instance. His icon will appear on the list of HL2 Characters. Clicking it will spawn a ragdoll, or "dead" version of him. Don't worry, you'll soon be bringing him to life.



03 BEAM ME UP, GARRY

The tool you'll be using most is the physics gun (it looks like a blue gravity gun). With it, you can pick objects up, move them around, and lock them in place. It's your default tool, also accessible by pressing the 1 key until it is selected. Hold down your left mouse button, and the physics beam will extend. It will then grab any moveable object you touch with it, such as the corpse of Dr. Breen you just spawned. You can pick him up by any part of his body, but try to lift him by his chest, and hold him right-side up over the ground.



04 STRIKE A POSE

While pressing the left mouse button, holding the E key and moving your mouse rotates any object you've got caught in your physics beam. Flex Breen until he's more or less right-side up, then lower him until his feet are flat on the ground with a tiny bit of bend in his knees. Then, lock his chest in place by right-clicking. He should now be hovering in place where you left him. Arms, legs, hands, and feet can be posed and locked in the same way. To unlock a part, just grab it with the beam again. Double-tapping the R key unlocks everything.



05 JUNK IN THE TRUNK

With his chest locked and his limbs dangling, use your physics beam to pose and lock his head in a natural position. Then, move around to view him from the side. Chances are, Breen's butt is sticking way out. Tucking it in will make his pose look more natural and take the bend out of his knees. Once his backside is locked in, return to face him from the front and make sure the line of his jacket is nice and straight. If you did it right, he should look a little less constipated.



06 JUST AN EXPRESSION

To create facial expressions, select the Face Poser tool from the Q menu, then shoot your ragdoll in the face (it's okay, he's already dead). Hold down the C key to bring up the huge list of face pose sliders, which allow you to adjust different aspects of your ragdoll's mug. For a goofy smile, use the Smile slider and raise the left and right "mouth stretch," and add a touch of "jaw clench" and "jaw drop." Play with the Expression Scale (the sensitivity setting) until you find one you're happy with (for *TF2* characters, it should be very low, around 0.4).



07 COLLISION COURSE

Let's try putting a gun in a ragdoll's hand. Select a gun from your Q menu's lists of props (in this case, the *Team Fortress 2* menu), and it'll spawn on the ground in front of you. Then, select the No Collide tool from your menu. Shoot your ragdoll with it, then shoot the gun you just spawned. From then on, they'll pass through each other like ghosts instead of bumping into each other, allowing for easy posing. Select the Finger Poser tool, holding down the C key to access the sliders (just like the Face Poser), and curl your ragdoll's fingers around the gun.



08 EMOTE AND EMIT

Emitters are objects that create dynamic effects for your comic, like blood spurts and muzzle flashes. Select the Emitter gun from your Q menu, choose the effect you'd like from the list, and assign it a control key in the display. Then, simply fire the Emitter gun to place your Emitter, and toggle the number key to activate it. You can move and lock the Emitter with the physics beam like you would any object. Don't worry about the Emitter itself—when you look through your camera tool (outlined in the next step), the Emitter will be invisible.



09 SAY CHEESE

Your camera tool is in your number 6 weapon slot—just press your 6 key and left-click. Your HUD will vanish, leaving you a nice clean screen for taking pictures. Just left-click to snap away. Your pictures will be saved in your Valve directory, by default: `Valve\Steam\steamapps\your user name\garrysmod\garrysmod\screenshots`. Take a number of pictures of your scene from various distances and angles so you have a lot of visual material to work with. You can also save your game to make changes to your poses later. Exit Garry's Mod; it's time to put your comic together.



10 CREAM OF THE CROP

Open Photoshop (or your image editor of choice) and create a new file, about 800 pixels wide by 1000 tall. This is your canvas. Open your screenshots separately, using the crop tool (press C) to click and drag a box around the area of the screenshot you want to use. Right-click and select "Crop." Now you've got a comic panel. On the Image menu, select Image Size if you need to shrink your panel to fit your canvas. Select all your objects, and through the Edit menu, click Copy. Return to your canvas, and select Paste. Now, drag your panel where you want it on your canvas.



11 LAYER CAKE

Photoshop uses a layer system: your canvas is the bottom layer; above it, your pasted panels, text, and illustrations. Using the type tool (press T), type in your comic's text. Arrange your lines of text in an oval shape to make it easier to fit your word bubbles around them. Create a layer for your word bubbles (on the Layer menu, select New) above the panel layers and below the text layers (you can click and drag layers in the Layer Window to reorder them), then choose your elliptical marquee tool (M) and drag an oval around your text.



12 BUBBLE BOBBLE

Choose your pen tool (P) and create a closed triangle pointing from your character's mouth to inside the bubble. Right-click your triangle, choose Make Selection, then Add To Selection. This combines your bubble and triangle as a single object. Choose your paint-bucket tool (G) and click inside the bubble to fill it with white. On your menu go to Layer, Layer Style, and Stroke. Use an inside stroke of 2 or 3 pixels. When you're happy with everything, go to Layer, then Merge Visible, and save your comic as a jpeg. Now all you have to do is upload it to the internet to assure instant global fame and the adoration of millions.





LOGAN DECKER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

MY SPACE

Listening to console gamers talk about how great games look in high definition is kind of like listening to some old guy yammer on about how much he enjoys using his electronic mail. Then again, these are the same folks who, as adults, get their rocks off banging on plastic guitars with enormous buttons in bright primary colors, so you have to cut them some slack.

But the console Bettys and Bobbys did have a good reason to upgrade their televisions to high definition, which was tough for me because I don't watch much television—I'm very happy with my Gateway 30-inch LCD for gaming and movies, and my living room is also so small that the cat's always trying to take a dump in it. This past holiday season was really the final straw, however. Watching the poorest of the poor in filthy T-shirts and flip-flops carting away 42- and even 60-inch flat-screen TVs at Costco and paying for them with water-cooler jugs full of change, while I go home to watch my Blu-ray disc of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* sitting in a stiff, squeaky office chair in front of my computer? Lame.

I still haven't decided what size HDTV I'm going to buy, as the 42-inch I can afford seems just about right for my living room but the 50-inch model tells any visitor with less than his or her life has been a complete and utter failure without my having to say so out loud. Construction of a new media center PC with a Blu-ray drive and a couple of terabytes of greatest hits from my movie and music collection stuffed into D-Link's DNS-323 Network Storage Enclosure (\$210, www.dlink.com) has already begun, and though not even the Panasonic Viera 50-inch (reviewed on page 83) is "high definition" enough to display *Fallout 3* in the full flower of its majesty, I think I can live with a do-over of that or *Tomb Raider: Underworld* at 1080p on a 50-inch screen.

Heck, I might even take another cue from my console brothers and sisters and rock out in the living room with *Audiosurf*. At least it will keep the cat from peeing on my new TV. ☺

HARD STUFF

NICE MICE (AT TWICE THE PRICE)

■ TWO HARDCORE MICE FOR GAMERS WHO MEAN BUSINESS

LOGITECH G9X LASER MOUSE

\$99, WWW.LOGITECH.COM CATEGORY: DREAM



I refused to review Logitech's G9x Laser Mouse until the company provided me with some way to put my picture on it. That story is almost true. Now, not only can you put a picture of me on your mouse, but that picture will be on a particularly comfortable jobber that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Microsoft's Sidewinder Mouse and throws in resolution up to a nutty 3200 dpi and the ability to toggle the scroll wheel from a



/// Custom mouse grips for self-love. ///

traditional notched wheel to a super-fast smooth scroller by pushing a button on the underside. The dpi switcher is smartly placed and shaped so that it's easy to toggle with your index finger but nearly impossible to trigger by accident.

The G9x is also unique among asymmetrical mice in that it can be comfortably handled and its features easily accessed by lefties as well. Stores up to five profiles locally, comes with 28 grams of metal weights, and tracks like a dream. I'd love it even if it didn't bear my own visage.

VERDICT: 93%

STEELSERIES WORLD OF WARCRAFT MMO GAMING MOUSE

\$99.99, WWW.STEELSERIES.COM CATEGORY: DREAM



/// Back to the drawing forge. ///

Profiles for individual characters, custom macros, 15 buttons, and 130 in-game commands all housed in a comfortable, illuminated brushed metal carapace. Sounds awesome. Instead, the MMO Gaming Mouse turns out to be mostly awkward and frustrating, like wearing armor two sizes too large. Linking profiles to individual characters, for example, is just a fancy way of giving the profiles unique names—you still have to manually select the profile that matches your current character. And assigning buttons to in-game commands is almost worthless. Those that aren't simply issued as typed text (meaning you have to take your hand off the keyboard when you press the button, or you'll screw up the command) assume you use WoW's default keybindings.

The MMO Gaming Mouse does allow you to create custom macros with a timed delay between keystrokes. This seems to violate the spirit of WoW's ban on botting, but Blizzard assured me that they're OK with it, thus sparing the MMO Gaming Mouse an even harsher verdict for big promises but little payoff.

VERDICT: 68%

LIFE AT 40 AND UP

PC GAMING GOES LARGE ON HDTVS

The current generation of consoles and high-definition television sets are natural buddies: Both are native denizens of the living room and both give the kids something to do while Mommy and the FedEx guy chat quietly upstairs. But only recently have HDTVs been both good and affordable enough for PC gaming, and it's just as well—the console folks dealt with all the

initial problems, particularly scaling lag (a delay between your input and what happens on the screen, a nightmare that's a result of internal scalars emphasizing image

refinement over refresh speed when blowing up images from non-native resolutions). So you can expect to see more big-screen action here in the Hard Stuff pages in the year ahead, beginning with a couple of 40-inch-plus lovelies from Westinghouse and Panasonic that can make *Left 4 Dead* feel like a pants-browning, interactive IMAX movie. ✕

WESTINGHOUSE 42-INCH TX-42F430S

The Westinghouse had an edge right out of the box for a reason that has absolutely nothing to do with its competence as a display unit: It's just my style. The matte gray bezel and base recede from view, and a super-handsome steely-gray strip conceals

the display mode settings (four preset and one user) show you the numerical adjustments to various settings being made (brightness, contrast, saturation, etc.) as you toggle between them. There are four HDMI inputs, and though I'm a little bummed that the composite and

S-video jacks have to share a single RCA audio input, it's nice that all the cables plug into both sides of the wide, flat spine of the set, so that they run horizontally instead of sticking out of the back of the set.

PC games on the TX-42F430S look absolutely, uniformly spectacular, with no appreciable ghosting or smearing, and when you're speeding past the San Francisco waterfront at

I dunno about you, but I'm locked into perma-battle with soaring electric bills at home, so I do appreciate the "E.Saver" power mode that drops power consumption below 1 watt when not in use, which adds about 15 seconds to the startup time. In other words, Windows Vista will still be booting long after the Westy's ready for action.

WHILE THE MINOR COLOR issues and the lackluster black levels keep the TX-42F430S from being the all-around perfect entertainment center HDTV and getting an Ed Choice award, the funny thing is that I'd be likely to buy this model over the higher-scored Panasonic Viera TH-50PZ800U for its terrific design, smart jack arrangements, power-saving feature, and zero glare—all terrific characteristics that make me want to set up this big guy on my office desk and edit the Hard Stuff pages with the same epic drama and intensity that I feel when I'm gaming.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Screen Size (diagonal): 42-inch
Native resolution: 1920x1080
NTSC modes: 480p, 720p, 1080i, 1080p
Weight: 66.1 lbs. (including base)
Speakers: 10-watt (2)
Video inputs: HDMI (4), VGA, component (2), composite, S-Video, antenna
Menu pass/fail: Pass, with honors

VITALS URL: WWW.WESTINGHOUSE.COM
MSRP: \$1,299 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**
** EXCELLENT **

/// Sofa tourism at its finest. ///

the down-firing speakers and keeps the set from looking too downbeat. There's no tacky, glossy plastic finish or garish insignia plastered all over the set, just a subtle gray W in the center. (The remote is another matter: a gross generic stick that should be concealed between the sofa cushions whenever possible.)

Setup is uncomplicated and the menu exceptionally well laid-out and informative—there's a "quick install matrix" that advises you on the best connections for different devices and includes a toll-free customer service number, and

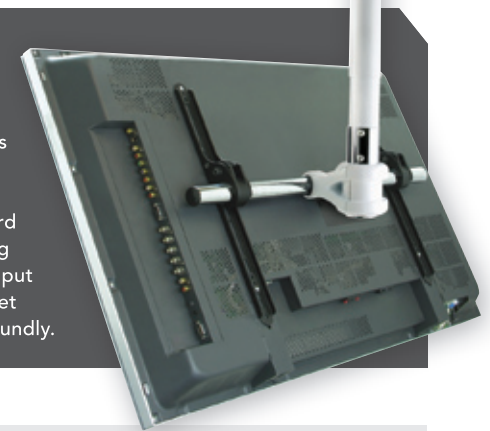
156mph in *GRID* or looking at swirling wisps of light and about fifty coruscating light seeds floating about in Ubisoft's revamped *Prince of Persia*, that's saying something. The only deficit lies in the slightly weak black levels, barely noticeable in games but more prominent in movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* where people are trying to kill each other at night in their pajamas. Standard definition video—DVDs and broadcast—seemed to promote green hues disproportionately, which required some tweaking to compensate for.

HANGERS-ON

The only thing cooler than having a flat-panel HDTV is having a wall-mounted flat-panel HDTV that dispenses warm salted peanuts. The Telehook 31-55 Tilt Wall mounting bracket from Atdec (pictured here with an optional ceiling mount; \$85, www.atdec.com.au) does half of that. Assembly was much easier than I thought it would be (if you buy a product like this online, make sure to check what kind of tools are required; the 31-55 Telehook, for instance, needs a 6mm drill bit

for timber studs and a 13mm metric socket drive that I didn't even know existed), but hoisting and lining up a large display requires at least two people (or four nerds).

The advantage of the Tilt Wall model is that it allows you to angle the set downward for console gamer-style gamepad/beanbag action on the rug. Sturdy? You bet. I could put a cardboard box full of kittens beneath a set mounted on Atdec's joint and still sleep soundly.



PANASONIC 50-INCH VIERA TH-50PZ800U

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE Panasonic's 50-inch Viera TH-50PZ800U didn't have the advantage of the immediate, below-the-waist attraction I had toward the Westy. But no matter—it won me over anyway, and despite the unpalatable glossy base, gaudy logos on the trim, thin metal rim, and smudge-o-philic glass fascia, the picture quality is to swal-

reproduction is superb, requiring either minimal tweaking or none at all, even with standard-def inputs. Throwing racing sims, Lara Croft, and the Prince with his new colorful duds at the set didn't bring out a hint of smearing or ghosting. The only beef I have with the image is the glare, which, depending on the set's orientation and the environmental lighting, can be serious—serious enough, in fact, to warrant caution

people really use these things? I'm always terrified I'll forget what exactly was on that SD card until everybody sees it in widescreen). The menu system is fine and the remote serviceable, but, surprisingly, the Viera doesn't support picture-in-picture, and it doesn't have an energy-saving option to match that of the Westinghouse model. Resolution is limited to 1366x760 through the VGA connection, but please tell me you're not going to use that with this TV. It, and you, deserve better.

WHETHER OR NOT A 50-inch screen is appropriate for you is not for me to determine, as I have no way of knowing if you've got a freight elevator going up to your attic bedroom. If it is, then the flawless image quality and ace refresh of the Viera TH-50PZ800U can take the theater and entertainment center that console gamers have enjoyed in their living rooms for years, and add to it the PC games in glorious larger-than-life dimensions that they haven't.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Screen Size (diagonal): 50-inch
Native resolution: 1920x1080
NTSC modes: 480p, 720p, 1080i, 1080p
Weight: 99.2 lbs. (including base)
Speakers: 31-watt plus sub (4)
Video inputs: HDMI (4), VGA, component (2), composite (2), S-Video (2), antenna
Menu pass/fail: Pass

VITALS URL: WWW.PANASONIC.COM
MSRP: \$2,499.95 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**
** EDITORS' CHOICE **



/// Yet another reason to never leave the living room. ///

low hemlock and die for.

The Viera TH-50PZ800U (who names these things, and why?) is the first display to make the rounds here at *PC Gamer* with the THX Display Certification badge, and it's a sign that this new certification process will be as dependable as the THX stamp on audio products has been. Those inky blacks I was missing on the Westy? Well here they are, and they bring out detail in dark scenes with luscious, lickable fidelity. Color

to anyone who intends to have this set facing, say, a picture window on the opposite side of the living room. But it's that same glare-prone screen, of course, that pumps so much vibrancy into some games and particularly Blu-ray movies.

Panasonic lavished conveniences on the Viera, including four HDMI ports, a front panel that conceals HDMI and composite inputs for quick hookups with your iPod and laptop, and an SD card reader (do

TRITTON AX PRO 5.1 HEADSET

■ THESE HEADPHONES
ARE HEAVIES

Setting up the all the wires and connections for the AX Pro 5.1 Headset from Tritton is like wrangling with one of those thousand-tentacled monsters out of Japanese manga, but once you've tamed the beast, well, damn if it doesn't sound sweet. The sound is powerful and clear, with plenty of room in the highs and lows, but the specialization is particularly fine (thanks to four individual speakers per earcup), and the delay effects can even be tweaked for a roomier, exaggerated sound. The volume from all four pairs of speakers can be individually adjusted via the inline remote, and the small breakout box decodes Dolby Digital and Dolby Pro Logic, includes an optical in, and permits game and voice communication volumes to be independently adjusted. These 'phones are extremely heavy, however—almost unbearably so after a half-hour—and the cups squeeze tightly and don't rotate to lie flat on your chest.

The AX Pro system is bested by the A40 Audio System (\$249.95, www.astrogaming.com; received a 97% in April 2008) in most categories—music audio quality, setup, and especially comfort—but the AX Pro costs \$70 less. And that could buy you a lot of ibuprofen. ☹



/// Worth the weight. ///

■ VITALS ■ URL: WWW.TRITTONTECHNOLOGIES.COM
MSRP: \$175 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **84%**

■ EXCELLENT ■

Q&A: THE CLEAN SCREEN

I don't get a lot of letters about how to properly clean a monitor, but I do receive on a regular basis anguished missives from readers who used the wrong products to clean the glass on their flat-panel and laptop displays, resulting in streaks and smears that won't come off, *ever*. And there's not much I can say at that point other than it beats shattering the glass with your Wiimote.

What makes these stories particularly poignant and worthy of the Lifetime Movie of the Week treatment is that you really don't need anything more than a slightly damp microfiber cloth to clean any display. You can pick up microfiber cloths at just about any supermarket or drugstore for

chump change; water is available in the bathtub. When I say "slightly damp," I mean nearly-dry damp, so that if you flicked the cloth hard you wouldn't see a mist. Just run this over the screen every couple of weeks. That's it. Don't use household rags (which might have traces of harsh cleanser on them), paper towels (which have stiff fibers that could scratch your screen), or toilet paper (which leaves lint everywhere and is just plain wrong).

If you can't stand the thought of your money earning interest in a savings account, feel free to buy fancy screen-cleaning kits. I actually like the squeegee-like microfiber cloth holder that comes with the Sanus Screen Care Kit (\$29.99, www.sanus.com), and the simple water and sodium lauryl-sulfate compound the "cleaning gel" contains could, say, safely remove a layer of peanut oil better than plain water if you somehow managed to spray it all over your HDTV. But don't think for a moment that

it's necessary or even superior to plain water and microfiber for keeping the sheen on your screen. ☺



/// Screen cleaning kits may be unnecessary, but they can make you look more intense about your stuff. ///

HARD STUFF TRINITY

☛ DREAM SYSTEM

CASE AND PSU COOLER MASTER HAF; 1000W PSU	\$387
PROCESSOR INTEL CORE I7-965 3.2GHZ	\$1,019
MOTHERBOARD INTEL DX58SO	\$307
MEMORY CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	\$121
OPTICAL DRIVE LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY/ HD DVD/DVD MULTI	\$134
HARD DRIVE WD 150GB RAPTOR, WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	\$220
SOUNDCARD CREATIVE PCI-E X-FI XTREME GAMER	\$100
VIDEOCARDS GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB (2)	\$732

\$3,020

☛ MID-RANGE

CASE AND PSU ANTEC P180B; 850W PSU	\$250
PROCESSOR INTEL CORE 2 DUO E8500 3.16GHZ	\$189
MOTHERBOARD ASUS P5N-E SLI	\$99
MEMORY CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	\$50
OPTICAL DRIVE LITE-ON LH-20A1H	\$34
HARD DRIVE WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	\$61
SOUNDCARD CREATIVE PCI-E X-FI XTREME GAMER	\$100
VIDEOCARD GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB (2)	\$732

\$1,515

☛ ENTRY-LEVEL

CASE AND PSU GENERIC CASE; 450W PSU	\$135
PROCESSOR AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	\$91
MOTHERBOARD ASUS M2N-MX	\$56
MEMORY CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	\$50
OPTICAL DRIVE LITE-ON LH-20A1H	\$34
HARD DRIVE WD 250GB WD2500JS 7,200RPM	\$54
SOUNDCARD ONBOARD	\$0
VIDEOCARD GEFORCE 8600GT	\$58

\$478



THE GAME WHISPERERS

WHERE PROMINENT DEVELOPERS SPEAK THEIR MINDS—A PC GAMER EXCLUSIVE

ZOMBIE OVERLORD

■ WE CHAT UP CHET FALISZEK, WRITER AND PRODUCER ON LEFT 4 DEAD

Having amused an older generation of gamers with his writing on seminal games humor site Old Man Murray, Chet Faliszek has moved onto games development. The pen behind Alyx's personality and the charming "Meet The" class videos in *Team Fortress 2* is making some bolder moves with *Left 4 Dead*.

PC GAMER: When did you realize that *Left 4 Dead* was going to be the next Valve game?

CHET FALISZEK: We realized that last winter. We had people coming off other projects and they started to move onto looking at aspects of *Left 4 Dead*. I think the team started off at about nine people and grew from there. Turtle Rock had a really good sense of how we like to do things and they'd taken it pretty far in that direction by the time we started to work on it properly. When we unleash all of Valve on a project, there's so much you can do. You could have said two years ago "this is shippable, it works," but there's so much later shaping of the game and detail and polish that has to go in.

What spurred the decision to change character designs late into the project?

"YOU COULD HAVE SAID TWO YEARS AGO 'THIS IS SHIPPABLE, IT WORKS' BUT THERE'S SO MUCH LATER SHAPING OF THE GAME AND DETAIL AND POLISH THAT HAS TO GO IN."

Well, partly it came about because we completely changed the facial animation. We moved it to the model we'd developed for *TF2*, where we'd done new faces that are more expressive—the animation is a little different there. We also addressed visibility issues, and worked hard to distinguish the characters from infected. So it was a combination of technical and artistic changes.

Talk a little bit about the dialogue and contextual chatter system. How did that all develop?

Once we'd done the initial character creation pass we knew who these characters were and what they were likely to say. As we played and watched playtesters go through particular situations, we took note of what we said, or what people said, and decided that we should make the characters say that. They also help with navigation, or commenting on things in the world in a helpful way. Little bits of character and backstory emerge too.

Let's talk about the role of the boss infected...

Originally, the whole game was basically Versus mode, with people playing as boss infected. We wanted the director to control everything, which meant that if you were a good infected player, your reward was more time spent not playing—which wasn't a good reward. So with Versus split off we were able to tweak things substantially. The maps are slightly different in Versus mode. The ammo room on the finale of No Mercy, for example, has more access, so it's harder to defend. In co-op mode these are just easier or harder parts of the map, but in Versus it becomes exploitable, so that's less fun and we have to deal with that. We're also faced with how to do difficulty overall—how would you do it in *TF2*? It's down to who your opponents are. In Versus there are skills you learn and there are a lot more combinations of talents than you might think. You end up having to be a much better survivor team, because player infected get to be so inventive. Who you attack and how you attack them is a big deal. We put a lot of work into that.

Learning to play the infected is a bit tricky, isn't it?

Sure, everyone understands getting a gun and fighting monsters, but when was the last time you played a game with a 50-foot prehensile tongue that you use to choke people?

Throwing up has never been more fun, that's for sure.

Exactly! Tongues and vomit. You learn to use that tongue, you figure out to grab the last guy, or to drag people into more trouble...

The boomer/smoker combination, right?

We love that. ☺



/// Valve used comments made by playtesters to inspire the survivors' lines. One of our faves is this gem from Zoey: "They're not allowed to be that fast! I'm calling zombie bull\$#@ on that." ///



KILLING BOX

BY NORMAN CHAN

COMMANDMENTS OF CO-OP

■ FOLLOW THESE RULES OR GET OUT OF MY LEFT 4 DEAD SERVER



/// Stay in a diamond formation—like its namesake, it's the toughest structure to break. ///

Along with the *PC Gamer* staff, I just can't get enough of 2008's multiplayer game of the year, *Left 4 Dead*. The formidable team of Stapleton, Lahti, Chan, and Will Smith (of *Maximum PC* fame) has exhausted all of the game's missions, and we've reached a point where we can complete any campaign on the Advanced difficulty setting with relative ease. But to get to this point, we've had to teach ourselves some important new lessons and play habits for cooperative play. After all, the teamplay tactics of *Team Fortress 2* don't all apply in a pure co-op challenge, and *Left 4 Dead* is not your ordinary *Gears of War*-style co-op game. And if you're starting on your way through a campaign on Expert difficulty with a squad of bunny-hopping *Counter-Strike* junkies, you're not going to get very far before the team breaks down. So to avoid the blame game, here are the rules that every player should master before embarking on a serious session of zombie killing.

1. KNOW THE MAP

It's your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the level layout before joining any server with experienced players. This means not only knowing the right path through the map, but also where to

SUCCUMBING TO TEMPTATION AND VENTURING OFF AS A LONE WOLF IS THE EASIEST WAY TO FAIL, SO IF YOU DON'T LIKE FOLLOWING ORDERS, LEARN TO GIVE THEM.

expect weapon, health, and ammo drops, suitable defense positions for every area, and the location of "hot spots" where you can expect to be attacked. *Left 4 Dead*'s environments are mostly linear with optimal routes, but there are several alternate pathways that you'll have to switch to on the fly in case you run into a tank or witch. Your team should also come up with standardized nicknames for area landmarks to avoid miscommunication.

2. ASSIGN A TEAM LEADER

Before the round begins, the team should designate one player to be the party leader, and agree to follow his or her directions for the duration of the campaign. Succumbing to the temptation of venturing off as a lone wolf is the easiest way to fail, so if you don't like following orders, learn to adequately give them. The leader should always be at the front of the pack

to navigate the team as a whole, letting the other players know when to pause for a zombie horde rush or the direction of immediate danger.

3. BE AWARE AT ALL TIMES

Sound is your most important sense in *Left 4 Dead*. Pay close attention to the game's music and thousands of dynamic sound effects, which help indicate the location of nearby threats. Being aware of your situation also isn't limited to knowing where enemies are in the map; it means knowing the overall strength of your teammates (health, ammo, and items) and when you're likely to be attacked. In Versus mode, for example, you should have an idea of how long it's been since you've killed a Boss Infected, so you can take advantage of enemy respawn times to scurry away from locations that leave you vulnerable for harassment.

4. STAY IN FORMATION

The best four-player formation: a diamond. The team leader sits at the front, crouched and always looking ahead. Two players also crouch-walk at his side, watching the left and right flanks for infected rushes. The last player stands tall and watches the backs of the other three players, calling out if a Smoker tries to pick him off. In games where one player is the obvious weak link, the formation should be rearranged to keep the weak player at the center of the pack, safe from Hunter pounces. In moments of chaos when the team is separated, use the buddy system and stay in pairs until the entire team can be reunited.

5. DON'T LET NEWBIES USE THE SHOTGUN

Keep these powerful but inaccurate toys in experienced hands. You don't want to fall victim to a friendly-fire "accident." Just ask Harry Wittington. ☺

VITALS: EMAIL: KILLINGBOX@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: LEFT 4 DEAD; TEAM FORTRESS 2; PRINCE OF PERSIA; GRAND THEFT AUTO IV; MIRROR'S EDGE



DISASTERS, DECISIONS, AND THE ROAD

WHY *FALLOUT 3* IS MY GAME OF THE YEAR

I've always found even crappy disaster flicks to be engaging, and not just because seeing Freddy Rodriguez get concurrently flattened, impaled, and then immolated is cathartic. Disaster films trigger a primal survival instinct that causes you to question what you'd do in the protagonist's circumstances. With a tornado bearing down on you, would you try to race to a partially shielded underpass or jump out and strap yourself to a pipe with your leather belt? If a tidal wave approaches, will you hop on a moped and try to outrace 700 mph waves up a hill like Elijah Wood, storm into a solid library building like Jake Gyllenhaal, or haplessly mew weepy paternal anecdotes like Tea Leoni? OK, maybe disaster films that solely contain nonsensical gibberish don't count.

BUT GOOD DISASTER STORIES

seem to draw you into them far more effectively than tales that are less threatening. I'm currently listening to the amazing audiobook version of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (McCarthy was in the spotlight last year for writing *No Country For Old Men*). It's a rare treat: a post-apocalyptic novel written by a top tier, 73-year-old author instead of a kid who still feels too nostalgic for afternoons spent croaking Lord Humungous lines after watching *The Road Warrior* for the tenth time. Navigating through *The Road* has been an affecting journey. It's impossible not to ponder how you'd react to the dire events that the characters confront. Would you accept a stranger's offer for assistance, or would you eschew human

contact and forgo potential resources in order to ensure the security of your party?

The best roleplaying games similarly cause you to question courses of action, and encourage you to vest personality into your alter-ego. Modern RPG fans too often seem to define the quality of a roleplaying game by the number of character development choices, instead of the frequency of genuine roleplaying choices. The perfect roleplaying game would allow you to do anything that a character in those circumstances could possibly do, and have that character's fortunes greatly depend upon creative strategies. Instead of storming a castle by trying to *fireball* through the front door, it might be more effective to spend some time in town and cull together some grappling equipment, or to trudge into the swamps looking for a sewer entrance. Rarely do RPGs reward or even permit such dynamic strategies, but the best ones like *Fallout 3* do, and that's one of the main reasons it's clearly our RPG and Game of the Year.

Fallout 3 is also, of course, a disaster story, and one that we can imagine and relate to far more readily than a fantastical tale of an evil wizard crushing the dwarves. So we're automatically more inclined to have empathy for the plight of our character, and to concoct survivalist strategies. Amazingly, in *Fallout 3* those intuitive tactics regularly work. Charismatic characters can bargain their way out of predicaments, stealthy assaults on enemy encampments are rewarded, and goals can invari-

FALLOUT 3'S LONG ROAD IS AT TIMES BLEAK AND AFFECTING, BUT THE PATH IS ALWAYS ONE OF YOUR OWN.

ably be achieved through an array of methods that reflect the strengths and personalities of characters. More than any other recent RPG, or computer game, *Fallout 3* legitimately gives you the opportunity to roleplay a character who could reflect your actual personality. You can even roleplay as yourself in *Fallout 3*'s world, and only make decisions that you personally would actually take in those circumstances. That's just not an opportunity granted very often, at least in any meaningful sense without a ton of extrapolation. *Fallout 3* draws you into its setting and allows you to walk your own road. Good Journey. ☺

VITALS: EMAIL: ALTLIVES@PCGAMER.COM
5 GAMES I'M PLAYING: *FALLOUT 3*; *ULTIMA IX ASCENSION*; *HELLGATE LONDON*; *THE WITCHER: ENHANCED EDITION*; *FALLOUT*





STRATEGIC COMMAND

BY DAN STAPLETON

SO CLOSE, YET SO FAR

WHERE HAVE ALL THE THE RTS/FPS HYBRIDS GONE?

After spending nearly every waking hour of several consecutive days playing *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II* and marveling at the detail of the unit models, environments, and weapon effects, I'm surprised and more than a little disappointed by the fact that to date, no one has made a great hybrid strategy-shooter game.

JUST A COUPLE OF years ago it seemed like the idea of being able to assume first- or third-person control of a unit and run amok on the battlefield was poised to become a standard feature, but instead modern RTS games have taken far more cues from the role-playing genre. It's nothing new—RPG-lite mechanics have been around since *WarCraft III*'s hero units began increasing in strength and gaining new powers as they leveled up from experience (*Sins of a Solar Empire*'s capital ships are perhaps the most recent and notable example), but now it's gotten to the point where *Dawn of War II* is more a party action RPG along the lines of *Freedom Force* than what you'd conventionally consider to be an RTS. That's not a complaint, by any means (I love me some *Freedom Force*, after all, and hopefully when 2K Boston's Ken Levine becomes all-powerful, he'll make the third installment), but while these features have me working harder to keep my soldiers alive, it's not letting me get my hands dirty when I'm feeling too detached from the action. What I wouldn't have given to try out the Force Commander's jump-jets and chainsaw sword for myself!

Even though I'm virtually the only critic to give it a positive review (every reviewer has at least one of those), I maintain that the game that has come closest to successfully hybridizing the genres is 2006's *Rise*



Zooming into a *DowII* battle like this really makes me want to take control of a unit and join the fray.

& *Fall: Civilizations at War*, which featured a "Hero Command Mode." For a limited time, you could jump into your hero unit's shoes and hack and slash your way through the enemy's legions. It wasn't a perfect implementation, but it was still pretty awesome to finally get to do some damage first-hand. I was certain we'd see more of that pop up in the near future, but here we are three years later and the only game that has even tried since then was *Field Ops*, a modern warfare RTS/FPS hybrid we previewed back in April 2007. And that one completely fizzled out without so much as a cancellation notice.

Rise & Fall has its flaws, but Hero Command is a feature worthy of *C&C* or *StarCraft*.

WHILE VISITING RELIC A few months back, I mentioned to *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts* Lead Designer Josh Mosqueria that the graphics in *CoH* are so good they make me want to jump down to ground level and play it as a shooter. He'd had the same thought, and asked the engineers about it, but found that it wasn't technically feasible with their Essence engine. Instead, they've cooked up a "Direct Fire Mode" for the upcoming *CoH: Tales of Valor*, which allows players to manually control a tank's turret and fire with a mouse click. It's probably the next best thing if you zoom in close, but still not quite as satisfying.

Even though it's not exactly the same thing (because you can't switch between modes at will), this is a great time to mention that a different take on FPS/RTS hybridization, *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul* (73%, May 2008), has been made free-to-play. Grab it from S2games.com.

RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR FEATURED A "HERO COMMAND MODE" THAT LET YOU JUMP INTO YOUR HERO UNIT'S SHOES.

EMAIL: STRATEGICCOMMAND@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR II; LEFT 4 DEAD; SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE; GTAIV; FALLOUT 3



SIM COLUMN

BY ANDY MAHOOD

SIM OF THE YEAR, PART DEUX

■ GRID MAY TAKE THE TROPHY, BUT iRACING TAKES THE hardcore CROWN

It's that time of the year once again at *PC Gamer* when our traditional awards issue divvies out well-deserved plaudits in every genre of computer gaming. The racing category—which previously focused on driving games with broader appeal while serious racing simulations were considered in a separate sim category—is now unified, so earning the 2008 nod carries even more weight than previous years.

You've likely already read that this year's winner is *GRID*, a graphically sumptuous—albeit arcadish—multiplatform racing game from Codemasters that single-handedly injects more fun into the act of digital driving than any PC racer from the past several years. Full credit to Codemasters for the honor (*GRID* is a terrific game from top to bottom), but hardcore sim racers probably won't buy into the selection as long as *iRacing.com* continues to thrive.

DAVE KAEEMER'S ONLINE

racing magnum opus opened its servers to the public last August (with some financial help from Boston Red Sox owner John Henry) and quickly developed into the go-to place for serious sim racers. The pay-to-play service—which features stunningly accurate laser scanned tracks like Laguna Seca, Daytona, and Sebring—attracts legions of dedicated sim racing hobbyists driving alongside a who's who of real world racing luminaries like NASCAR superstar Dale Earnhardt Jr., F1 champion Jacques Villeneuve, and IndyCar racer Justin Wilson.

iRacing.com is much more than just an online racing game. A paid subscription (ranging from \$13 to \$20 a month) delivers up officially sanctioned racing series in varied oval and road racing classes that are carefully regulated to ensure that



/// Sanctioned races, licensed cars and tracks, and hyper realistic physics modeling instantly separate *iRacing.com* from the rest of the sim racing pack. ///



/// Once you've proved yourself in the novice classes, you can upgrade to faster cars like the Radical SR8 sports racer. ///

yahoos and boneheads never make it out of pregrid. Complete a series of clean, incident-free races and you'll qualify for license upgrades for faster cars and newer, more challenging series. *iRacing* currently boasts nine licensed vehicles (including a showroom stock Pontiac Solstice, five oval racing machines, a Radical sports racer, and two spec formula car classes) as well as 26 licensed race tracks with 62 unique layout configurations.

The monthly subscription format prompted a lot of bitching from sim fans when Kaemmer and company first announced *iRacing.com* in late 2004 but the unqualified success of the service—from its sophisticated physics modeling and

unparalleled track accuracy to its growing sense of community and fair play—has since silenced the critics. After all, it's hard to grouse about a game that delivers serious real-world racing dynamics and accurate-to-the-millimeter motorsport venues without the attendant five- or six-figure costs an honest-to-god SCCA or short-track racing machine would generate each year.

So, with all of this wheel-spinning righteousness, why isn't *iRacing.com* a massive hit with PC gamers? Perhaps we played a small role here, because we never actually gave the game a proper review in the magazine's pages. Kaemmer's simulation-cum-MMORG didn't receive an official *PC Gamer* final verdict in 2008 (or an accompanying percentage rating), which in my estimation was a bit of an oversight.

NO SENSE CRYING FOUL

about the omission. Sh-t often happens in the publishing business where space constraints and editorial deadlines don't always permit us to review every game on the marketplace.

Such was the case with *iRacing.com* and the express purpose of this column is to redress that oversight.

I have no wish to malign Codemasters' or *GRID*'s achievement but, speaking on behalf of all hardcore sim racers with a force feedback wheel and pedal setup permanently attached to their desktops, the Sim Column hereby awards an *alternate* Best Racing medal to *iRacing.com* for its invaluable and unrivaled contribution to sport of PC sim racing. ☺

EMAIL: SIMCOLUMN@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: iRACING.COM; RFACTOR (DOT CHAMP CAR MOD); AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER 3; GTR EVOLUTION; CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR



BACKSPACE

BY EVAN LAHTI

STAR TREK DEMANDS

■ TODAY IS A GOOD DAY TO SPECULATE

At least 62 percent of the *PC Gamer* clan considers themselves hardcore Trekkies (to their credit, the remaining 38 is not opposed to warp technology), and on its behalf, I'm issuing a set of demands for *Star Trek Online*, Cryptic Studios' MMO-in-development based on our cherished sci-fi standard. If you're inclined to co-sign these requests (or produce your own), issue a statement to letters@pcgamer.com. ☒

PC GAMER PETITIONS FOR THE FOLLOWING GAME CONTENT IN STAR TREK ONLINE:

TRANSPORTER ACCIDENTS

Uh-oh. Your lieutenant commander's molecules got lost in subspace—is your science skill high enough to relay auxiliary power to the tachyon grid and save him?

HOLODECK ANTICS

Oh no, we accidentally made a fictional figure come to life! Oh no, we're trapped in the virtual 1950s, disabled the holo-safety mechanisms, and no one will believe we're from the future!

REPLICATORS

Goodbye auction houses, hello space loot on-demand.

AWAY TEAM MISSIONS TO PRE-WARP CULTURES

Violating the Prime Directive by playing phaser tag with the natives? Yes.

KLINGON RITE OF ASCENSION/STARFLEET ACADEMY

Before a Klingon can become a warrior, he must endure painstiks, powerful electric prods that test his physical and spiritual endurance. Before Wesley Crusher can become a cadet, he must wear a wacky one-piece jumper.

TRIBBLES AS PETS

Anything's better than a Murloc.

CUSTOMIZABLE JEFFERIES TUBES

With the amount of plot points that went down in these ladder-tunnels, we'd at least like to dress 'em up a little.

PLANET RISA: ADULTS-ONLY ZONE

Beam the kids back to grandma—you must be 18 or older to enter this hedonistic resort planet.

MAKE THE BORG SCARY

When a crew member gets assimilated, you'll face the tough choice to off them or use magical nanobots to restore their humanity.

SAUCER SEPARATION

Tactical uses be damned, we'd love scar-ing the *@&# out of the children on board. "Sorry, son. Mommy didn't make it to the battle bridge."

RED SHIRT RECRUITMENT

Disposable away-team members should grow on trees.

QUESTS

Reality-altering interruptions courtesy of everyone's favorite omniscient space demigod. Hey, John de Lancie isn't doing anything important these days.

Make it so,

pc gamer

NEXT MONTH

She doesn't like Disney movies or puppies, and she'd probably obliterate Hannah Montana with her mind. The exploits of our favorite pre-teen psychic (that happens to control an army of well-armed clones), Alma, are ready to be reviewed, and we're doing it sans nitelite.



PC GAMER

THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING PC GAMES MAGAZINE

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100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 31 other countries across the world. The Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). Down the steps, one by one, creep the ancient feet. The silence of the still night undisturbed, they lead her down the hallway to the final door, the last wooden window on the hall. Only an inch of oak stands between the cruel hands and their precious prey. Subdued in sleep, he does not hear the jagged fingernails begin to scrape or the painted splinters fall bloodied to the floor. He does not know she comes for him, but all the same she comes. Before he wakes she will find a way. Without knife or gun, she's here.

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